GATEWAY TO THE HEECHEE SAGA

FREDERIK POHL

THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS

Graphic adaptation by NEAL McPHEETERS and VICTORIA PETERSEN

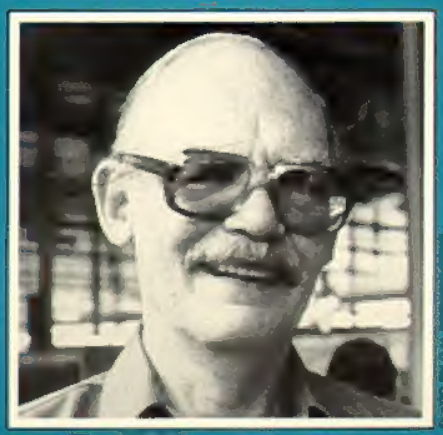
SCIENCE FICTION GRAPHIC NOVEL • SF 4 • $5.95/CAN $7.95

DC

Everything worth seeing on Venus was in Venus and it all belonged to the Heechees

—whoever and wherever in the galaxy they might be!

THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS



FREDERIK POHL

"Fred Pohl has done nearly everything in science fiction, generally better than anybody else."
—**Jack Williamson**

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—**George R. R. Martin**

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THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS

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MY NAME... AUDEE WALTHERS.
MY JOB... AIRBODY DRIVER.
MY HOME...ON VENUS... IN A HEECHEE HUT MOST OF THE TIME.
WHEREVER I HAPPEN TO BE WHEN I FEEL SLEEPY, OTHERWISE.
UNTIL I WAS TWENTY-FIVE I LIVED ON EARTH, IN AMARILLO CENTRAL MOSTLY.
MY FATHER, A DEPUTY GOVERNOR OF TEXAS, DIED WHILE I WAS STILL IN COLLEGE, BUT HE LEFT ME ENOUGH DEPENDENCY BENEFITS TO FINISH SCHOOL AND GET A MASTER'S IN BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION.
TEXAS
ROBOT RODEO
I SUPPOSE YOU COULD SAY THAT I WAS SET UP FOR LIFE.
BUT... I DISCOVERED THAT I DIDN'T LIKE THE LIFE I WAS SET UP FOR.

THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS

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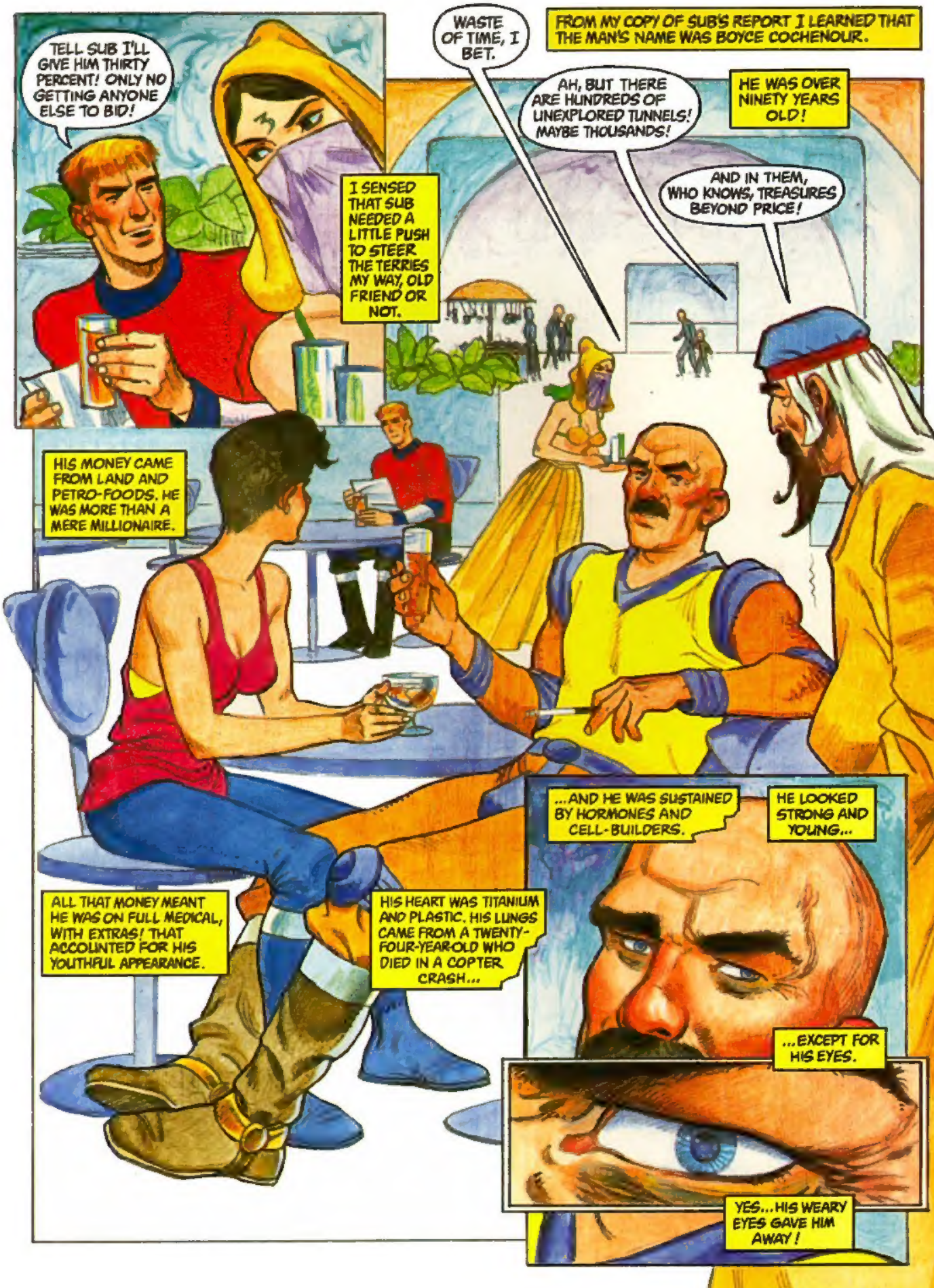
SO I SOLD MY U.O.P.W.A. JOURNEYMAN'S CARD...
...MORTGAGED MY PENSION ACCRUAL...
...AND BOUGHT A ONE-WAY TICKET TO VENUS.
BUT THAT WAS YEARS AGO.
THESE DAYS I WORK THE SPINDLE.
LIKE EVERYTHING WORTH SEEING ON VENUS, THE SPINDLE IS A HEECHEE LEFTOVER.
GUIDE
NOBODY KNOWS WHY THE HEECHEES WANTED SUCH A LARGE UNDERGROUND CHAMBER, BUT IT'S HERE, SO WE USE IT.
ALL TERRY TOURISTS HEAD FOR IT FIRST... AND THAT'S WHERE WE FLEECE THEM.
SURFACE TOURS
TO PEOPLE LIKE ME, THE TOURIST TRAPS ARE IMPORTANT.
I MEAN, WE MAKE OUR LIVING FROM THEM.
MY AIRBODY RENTAL BUSINESS IS REASONABLY LEGITIMATE...
...NOT COUNTING THE FACT THAT THERE ISN'T MUCH TO SEE ON THE SURFACE.
BUT, LIKE I SAID... THE TOURISTS ARE THE WAY I SURVIVE.

THAT'S WHY MY MONEY NOSE BEGAN TO QUIVER WHEN MY TIPPER ON THE LANDING PAD REPORTED THE ARRIVAL OF THE YURI GAGARIN UNDER PRIVATE CHARTER.
WHERRRROAR
TOURIST SEASON WAS OVER, EXCEPT FOR THE VERY RICH, AND THE ONLY QUESTION ON MY MIND WAS HOW MANY OF MY COMPETITORS WOULD BE TRYING TO CUT MY THROAT FOR ITS PASSENGERS.
ESPECIALLY SINCE THERE WERE ONLY TWO OF THEM.
BUT...AS IT TURNED OUT... A COUPLE OF MY COMPETITORS WERE U/S FOR REPAIRS, A COUPLE MORE HAD KITED OFF ON HEECHEE DIGGINGS, AND I HAD THE GAGARIN'S PASSENGERS PRETTY MUCH TO MYSELF.
I NEEDED THEIR MONEY VERY MUCH...
I HAD THIS LITTLE LIVER CONDITION, YOU SEE.
IT WAS GETTING PRETTY CLOSE TO TOTAL FAILURE!
THE WAY THE DOCTORS EXPLAINED IT...
...I COULD GO BACK TO EARTH AND LINGER A WHILE ON EXTERNAL PROSTHESES...OR I COULD GET UP THE MONEY FOR A TRANSPLANT...
CAFE
OR...I COULD DIE.

SUBHASH VASTRA, OWNER OF THIS "CAFE" AND LONGTIME ACQUAINTANCE OF MINE, FELL ALL OVER HIMSELF WAITING ON MY POTENTIAL MARKS...
SCOTCH!
YES, SAH!
SMOKE!
CRUMMY LOOKING JOINT!
ER... YES, SAH!
...WHILE HIS NUMBER-THREE WIFE TOOK MY ORDER.
THE USUAL!
AND I'LL BET THIS FIVER THAT YOU CAN GET ME A COPY OF YOUR OLD MAN'S BRIEFING ON THOSE TWO!
...AND IN OUR PRIVATE ROOMS WE HAVE THE FINEST ENTERTAINMENT OF THREE PLANETS! INCLUDING DAN...
WE'VE GOT PLENTY OF THAT IN CINCINNATI!
I DIDN'T COME TO VENUS FOR A NIGHTCLUB ACT!
HOW ABOUT AN AIRBODY TO THE SURFACE...
WHAT'S THE POINT OF A SURFACE TOUR?
RIGHT, SAH, NOT MUCH, SAH! ALL PRETTY HOT AND DRY UP THERE... BUT I WASN'T THINKING OF A TOUR, SAH!
WHAT, THEN?
AH, THE HEECHEE WARRENS, SAH! THERE IS ALWAYS THE CHANCE OF FINDING NEW DIGS THAT HAVEN'T BEEN LOOTED, PROVIDED ONE KNOWS WHERE TO LOOK!
AM I CORRECT IN ASSUMING THAT THIS WOULD INTEREST YOU?
NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE!


TELL SUB I'LL GIVE HIM THIRTY PERCENT! ONLY NO GETTING ANYONE ELSE TO BID!
I SENSED THAT SUB NEEDED A LITTLE PUSH TO STEER THE TERRIES MY WAY, OLD FRIEND OR NOT.
WASTE OF TIME, I BET.
AH, BUT THERE ARE HUNDREDS OF UNEXPLORED TUNNELS! MAYBE THOUSANDS!
AND IN THEM, WHO KNOWS, TREASURES BEYOND PRICE!
FROM MY COPY OF SUB'S REPORT I LEARNED THAT THE MAN'S NAME WAS BOYCE COCHENOUR.
HE WAS OVER NINETY YEARS OLD!
HIS MONEY CAME FROM LAND AND PETRO-FOODS. HE WAS MORE THAN A MERE MILLIONAIRE.
ALL THAT MONEY MEANT HE WAS ON FULL MEDICAL, WITH EXTRAS! THAT ACCOUNTED FOR HIS YOUTHFUL APPEARANCE.
HIS HEART WAS TITANIUM AND PLASTIC. HIS LUNGS CAME FROM A TWENTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD WHO DIED IN A COPTER CRASH...
...AND HE WAS SUSTAINED BY HORMONES AND CELL-BUILDERS.
HE LOOKED STRONG AND YOUNG...
...EXCEPT FOR HIS EYES.
YES...HIS WEARY EYES GAVE HIM AWAY!

THE GIRL WAS A DIFFERENT STORY!
HER NAME WAS DOROTHA KEEFER...
...AND SHE WAS IN HER EARLY TWENTIES, REAL AGE, NOT SIMULATED.
SHE AND COCHENOUR HAD BEEN TRAVELING TOGETHER FOR A COUPLE OF YEARS...AND THERE WAS NO INDICATION OF ANY MARRIAGE.
WHAT'S THIS THING FOR?
HEECHEE PRAYER FAN, MISS!
FOUND IT MYSELF, MISS. IT'LL GRANT YOUR EVERY WISH...MIRACULOUS RESULTS!
WELCOME TO VENUS...ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE HEECHEE STORY?
NO...NO, I'M NOT!
THEY BUILT THESE TUNNELS ABOUT A QUARTER OF A MILLION YEARS AGO.
AMONG OTHER THINGS, THEY LEFT A LOT OF THESE FANS BEHIND WHEN THEY DISAPPEARED.
SOME LOCAL CON-MAN STARTED CALLING THEM "PRAYER FANS" AND SELLING THEM TO THE TOURISTS TO MAKE WISHES WITH.
SEE HOW THIS ONE SPARKLES, MISS! HOW NICE IT LOOKS WITH YOUR HAIR!
BEEGEE HERE WILL SELL YOU THE SAME GOODS AS ANY OF THE OTHERS...
...BUT HE WON'T CHEAT YOU AS MUCH AS MOST OF THEM.
BOYCE--?

ALL RIGHT, BUY IT!
COME ON OVER AND HAVE A SEAT.
AND WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SELL ME?
MYSELF AND MY AIRBODY, IF YOU WANT TO GO LOOKING FOR UNSPOILED TUNNELS!
HOW MUCH?
ONE MILLION CREDITS...AND ANYTHING WE FIND IS YOURS!
WELL...LET'S SEE. YOU GOTTA CHARTER AN AIRBODY...RENT EQUIPMENT... BUY FOOD, SUPPLIES, AND PERMITS...THAT'S CLOSE TO SEVEN HUNDRED THOUSAND. BUT THEN, THERE'S YOUR SALARY AND WHAT YOU GIVE OUR HOST HERE AS HIS CUT... THAT ABOUT IT, WALTHERS?
AH...CLOSE ENOUGH, MR. COCHENOUR!
THERE DIDN'T SEEM TO BE MUCH POINT IN TELLING HIM THAT I OWNED MY OWN AIRBODY!
YOU'VE GOT A DEAL!
BE READY TO LEAVE EARLY TOMORROW!
I KNEW THAT HE HADN'T MISSED MY CALLING HIM BY NAME...BUT, THEN, IT WAS PART OF MY BUSINESS TO KNOW ALL ABOUT HIM! BUT, HOW THE HELL DID HE KNOW SO MUCH ABOUT MY BUSINESS? ESPECIALLY SINCE I HADN'T EVEN TOLD HIM MY NAME...
...AND, HE HAD CALLED ME BY MY NAME!

BUT... NO TIME TO WORRY ABOUT THAT... I HAD A LOT TO DO.
AFTER CHECKING MY EQUIPMENT TO MAKE SURE EVERYTHING WAS IN WORKING ORDER, I STOPPED IN TO SEE MY DOCTOR.
DR. MORIUS STUDIED THE INSTRUMENT READINGS CAREFULLY, AND EXPRESSED THE GUARDED HOPE THAT I WOULD SURVIVE A FEW MORE WEEKS -- PROVIDED I POPPED ALL THE PILLS HE GAVE ME... AND DIDN'T WANDER TOO FAR FROM HIS DIETARY RESTRICTIONS.
I HEAR YOU'VE HOOKED A RICH ONE. WANT ME TO BOOK YOU FOR A TRANSPLANT?
HOW RICH DID YOU HEAR HE WAS?
THE PRICE IS THE SAME IN ANY CASE!
GO AHEAD!
THREE WEEKS FROM TOMORROW!
NEXT I STOPPED IN AT THE LOCAL 88 OFFICE AND SIGNED AWAY THIRTY PERCENT OF MY TAKE TO SUB VASTRA AND PAID FOR MY GUIDE'S PAPERS.
THE WAY I HAD IT FIGURED, WITH WHAT I'D MAKE FROM COCHENOUR, PLUS A SMALL LOAN ON THE AIRBODY, I COULD JUST ABOUT PAY FOR MY TRANSPLANT.
LEAVING ME BROKE WHEN IT WAS OVER, BUT, OF COURSE, ALIVE!

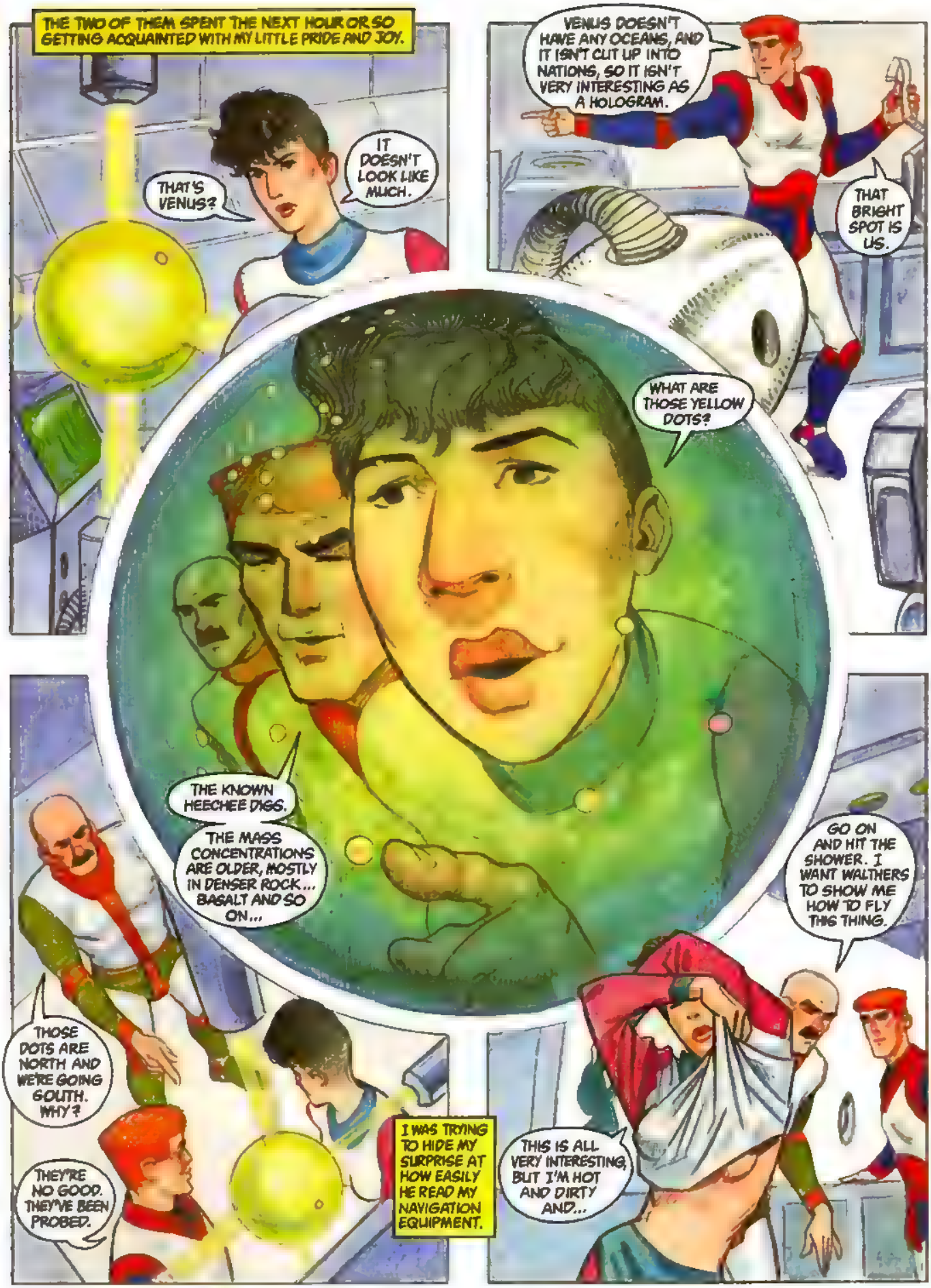
NOT BY ACCIDENT, THE LAST THING I DID THAT NIGHT WAS VISIT THE HALL OF DISCOVERIES.
THAT'S THE PLACE WE TAKE TERRIES TO SHOW THEM ALL THE TREASURES FROM THE TUNNELS.
HELLO, MR WALTHERS.
SINCE WE'LL BE SEEING A LOT OF EACH OTHER, HOW ABOUT GETTING ON TO FIRST NAMES?
AUDEE, IS IT?
SWEDE ON MY MOTHER'S SIDE, OLD-LINE TEXAN ON MY FATHER'S.
THEY'RE PRETTY... BUT WHY ALL THE PROTECTION? I SAW BIGGER ONES IN THE SPINDLE, WITHOUT ANYBODY EVEN WATCHING THEM!
THAT'S A LITTLE DIFFERENT, DOROTHA. THESE ARE REAL.
I SEE!
ANYTHING OVER THREE CENTIMETERS IN SIZE IS A FAKE. IT WOULD GENERATE TOO MUCH HEAT AND MELT!

SO, THE ONES YOUR FRIEND BEEGEE TRIED TO SELL ME...?
--ARE FAKES! RIGHT!
WHAT ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO SELL US, AUDEE? REAL OR FAKE? DO WE HAVE ANY CHANCE OF FINDING AN UNSPOILED TUNNEL?
WELL, ALL THIS STUFF CAME FROM HEECHEE TUNNELS, RIGHT?
YES...BUT NONE OF THE DISCOVERY DATES ON THESE THINGS IS LESS THAN FIFTY YEARS OLD!
AND THE CONCLUSION IS THAT THE FIRST DIGGERS FOUND EVERYTHING?
DO YOU THINK THERE'S MORE?
LOOK, NOBODY KNOWS HOW THE HEECHEES BUILT THESE TUNNELS ... OR WHY THEY GLOW WITH A LIGHT THAT NEVER VARIES! I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW THAT!
WE DO KNOW THAT THEY BREATHED OXYGEN WHICH THEY SOMEHOW EXTRACTED FROM THE LESS THAN HALF OF ONE PERCENT CONTENT ON THE SURFACE!
HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO FIND THE MACHINE THEY USED TO DO THAT?

ALSO, THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT THEY FLEW WITH EASE ON THE SURFACE, WHERE THE TEMPERATURE IS HIGHER THAN MOST ENGINE EXHAUST...
BUT YOU FLY ON THE SURFACE... YOU'RE A PILOT!
SURE, BUT LOOK WHAT IT TAKES. THE NORMAL WIND VELOCITY IS 300 KILOMETERS PER HOUR AND THERE'S NOT ENOUGH OXYGEN UP THERE TO KEEP A CIGARETTE GOING. MY AIRBODY HAS TO...
WHY, YOU POOR FELLOW. YOU'RE HOOKED ON THE STUFF YOU SELL!
YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING TO FIND THE MOTHER TUNNEL...WITH ALL THE ANSWERS AND ALL THE TREASURES!
YEAH...WELL...I'M A LITTLE TIRED. WE'VE GOT A LONG TRIP TOMORROW... MAYBE I'D BETTER TAKE YOU HOME, MS. KEEFER.
I'D ARRANGED FOR DOROTHA TO BE BROUGHT HERE, AWAY FROM HER BOYFRIEND, SO I COULD PICK HER BRAIN--BUT...
...THE WAY IT WAS WORKING OUT, SHE WAS MAKING ME AWARE OF HER AS A PERSON...
...AND WORSE, MAKING ME TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT MYSELF!

LOADING AND DEPARTURE THE NEXT DAY CAME OFF WITHOUT A HITCH.
I WAS PREPARED FOR SARCASM, AT LEAST FROM COCHENOUR, BECAUSE OF MY OVERCROWDED LITTLE AIRBODY.
WITH WHAT SUB VASTRA'S PURCHASING DEPARTMENT HAD SOLD US, AND LOCAL 88 HAD CERTIFIED AS ESSENTIAL, IT WAS CROWDED.
SO...THERE I WAS...LEFT WITH MY GLANDS ALL CHARGED UP FOR AN ARGUMENT...AND NO ARGUMENT.
BUT COCHENOUR DIDN'T SEEM TO NOTICE, AND DOROTHA WAS A GOOD SPORT.
SO...I FED THE HYDROCARBON AND OXIDANT FUELS INTO THE THERMOJETS AND WE SLAMMED THROUGH THE TWENTY-THOUSAND MILLIBAR ATMOSPHERE...
VVVAARRROOOOMMM
...INTO THE WILD YELLOW-GREEN YONDER.

COCHENOUR HAD FASTENED HIS HARNESS LOOSELY FOR COMFORT. I ENJOYED HEARING HIM YELL AS HE WAS THROWN ABOUT.
IT DIDN'T LAST LONG.
AT THE THOUSAND-METER LEVEL I FOUND VENUS'S SEMI-PERMANENT ATMOSPHERIC INVERSION, AND THE TURBULENCE DROPPED.
HUMPH!
PRETTY EXCITING.
IS IT ALL RIGHT IF I SMOKE?
THEY'RE YOUR LUNGS.
THEY ARE NOW.
THAT WASN'T AS BAD AS I THOUGHT.
YEAH, AS VENUS TAKE-OFFS GO, THAT ONE WASN'T TOO BAD.
SOMETIMES SOLID OBJECTS COME FLYING OVER THE HILLS AND INTO YOU BEFORE YOU KNOW IT, OR...
I GET IT... WE'RE LUCKY.
LOVELY PLACE WE'RE VISITING, BOYCE.


THE TWO OF THEM SPENT THE NEXT HOUR OR SO GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH MY LITTLE PRIDE AND JOY.
THAT'S VENUS?
IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE MUCH.
VENUS DOESN'T HAVE ANY OCEANS, AND IT ISN'T CUT UP INTO NATIONS, SO IT ISN'T VERY INTERESTING AS A HOLOGRAM.
THAT BRIGHT SPOT IS US.
WHAT ARE THOSE YELLOW DOTS?
THE KNOWN HEECHEE DIGS.
THE MASS CONCENTRATIONS ARE OLDER, MOSTLY IN DENSER ROCK... BASALT AND SO ON...
GO ON AND HIT THE SHOWER. I WANT WALTHERS TO SHOW ME HOW TO FLY THIS THING.
THOSE DOTS ARE NORTH AND WE'RE GOING SOUTH. WHY?
THEY'RE NO GOOD. THEY'VE BEEN PROBED.
I WAS TRYING TO HIDE MY SURPRISE AT HOW EASILY HE READ MY NAVIGATION EQUIPMENT.
THIS IS ALL VERY INTERESTING, BUT I'M HOT AND DIRTY AND...

COCHENOUR LEARNED FAST. IT TURNED OUT HE HAD FLOWN EVERYTHING THAT MOVED ON EARTH, SO HE UNDERSTOOD EVERYTHING AS SOON AS I EXPLAINED IT TO HIM
WHAT THE HELL...THAT'S ENOUGH, WALTHERS.
AT LEAST I CAN MAKE IT GO WHERE I HAVE TO, IN CASE YOU GET TRAPPED IN A TUNNEL...
UNLESS YOU'RE REALLY GOOD AT IT, I'LL DO THE COOKING.
I PAID TOO MUCH FOR THIS STOMACH TO FILL IT WITH HASH.
FINE WITH ME.
...OR SHOT BY A JEALOUS HUSBAND.
NOW, SHOW ME THE STOVE!
COOKING IS A SKILL DORRIE NEVER GOT AROUND TO LEARNING.
SAME WITH HER GRANDMOTHER. MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN THE WORLD, BUT HAD THE IDEA THAT THAT WAS ALL THERE WAS TO IT.
I PUT THAT ASIDE TO SORT OUT LATER.
HE WAS FULL OF LITTLE UNEXPECTED THINGS, THIS NINETY-YEAR-OLD YOUNG ATHLETE.

A FEW HOURS LATER, AFTER TESTING MOST OF THE PROBE AND SEARCH EQUIPMENT, AND ANSWERING A MILLION QUESTIONS FROM MY PASSENGERS, WE SAT DOWN TO THE FIRST OF OUR GOURMET MEALS.
I WAS ABOUT TO ADMIT THAT THIS OLD GEEZER WITH THE MUSCLE-BEACH BODY COULD COOK, WHEN HE RUINED THE MOOD.
HOW COME YOU PICKED THIS PARTICULAR MASCON TO PROSPECT?
HE HAD A DISTURBING HABIT OF ASKING QUESTIONS I DIDN'T WANT TO ANSWER.
FIVE YEARS OF STUDY, A LOT OF DIGGING, AND ABOUT A QUARTER OF A MILLION CREDITS' WORTH OF CORRESPONDENCE WITH PROFESSOR HEGRAMET BACK ON EARTH, HAD BROUGHT ME HERE... AND... I HAD A MAP!
BUT I DIDN'T WANT TO TELL HIM MY REASONS.
CALL IT AN INFORMED GUESS!
AND NOW, LET'S GET THE FOOD PUT AWAY...WE'RE WITHIN TEN MINUTES OF OUR SEARCH AREA

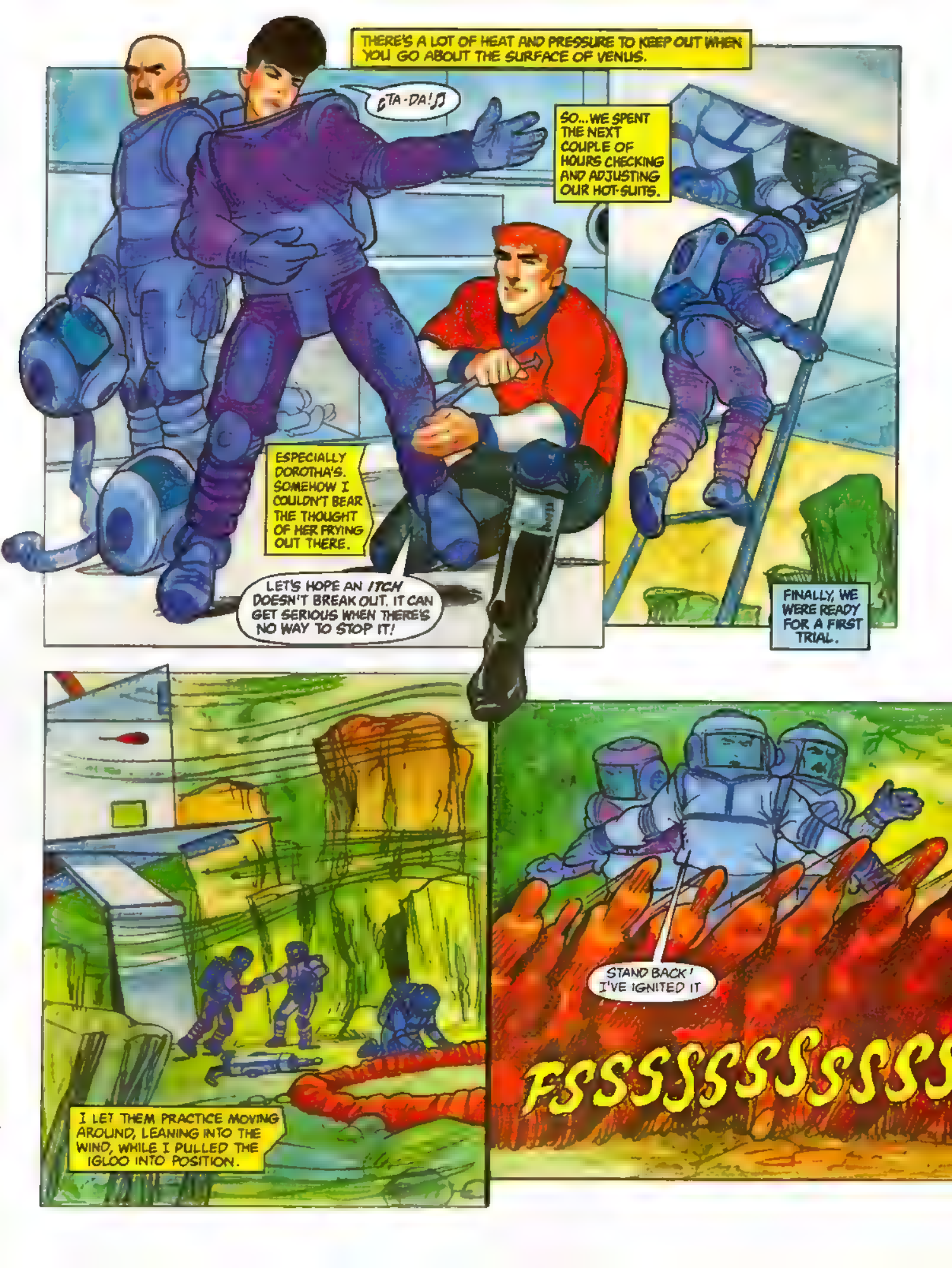
WITH EVERYTHING STRAPPED DOWN AND OURSELVES BELTED UP, WE DROPPED DOWN INTO THE BIG WINDS.
I VERIFIED OUR POSITION ON THE VECTOR GLOBE...
...DEPLOYED THE AUTOSONIC PROBES.
...AND THEN SET US DOWN!
WE'RE HERE FOR AT LEAST A DAY OR TWO.
MORE IF WE'RE LUCKY. HOW DID YOU LIKE THE RIDE?
=phew=... I'M GLAD I DON'T GET AIRSICK!

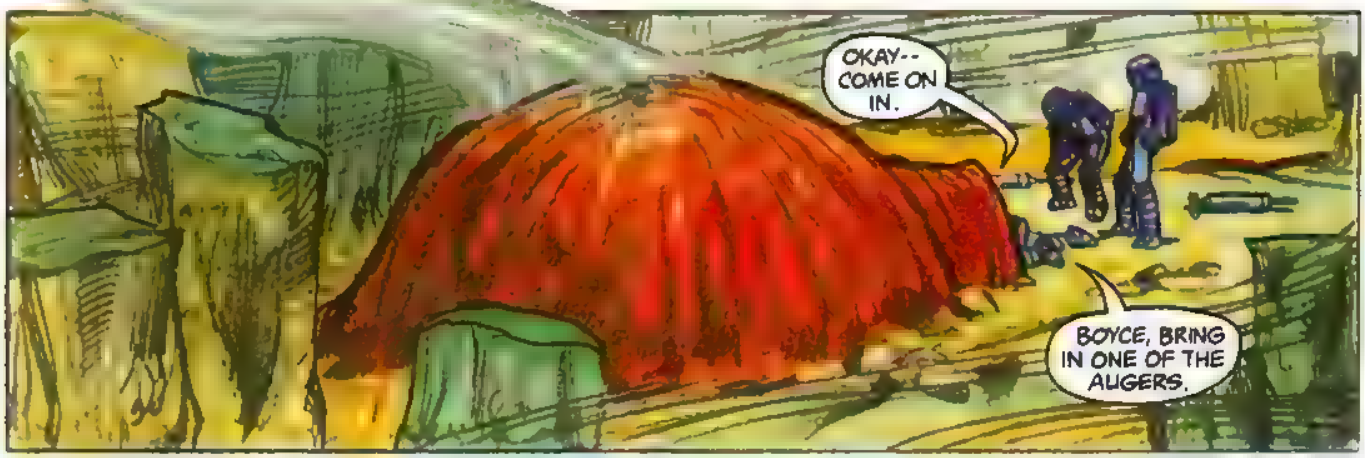
OUTSIDE, THE WIND SCREAMED.
YOU'LL GET USED TO THE NOISE AFTER A WHILE.
AFTER WE'VE BEEN HERE A WEEK, YOU WON'T EVEN NOTICE IT.
IT'S THE FIRST WEEK I'M WORRIED ABOUT
WE'RE NOT GOING TO GET ENOUGH INFORMATION TO MAKE A READING FOR HOURS!
SIX OR EIGHT, I'D SAY.
ANOTHER LITTLE SURPRISE... HE KNEW HOW THE SCANNERS WORKED!
DO WHATEVER YOU LIKE WHILE WE WAIT FOR A READOUT. BUT I'D ADVISE WE ALL GET SOME SLEEP.
I'VE GOT PILLS IF YOU WANT THEM.
WHAT ABOUT YOU?
NOT JUST YET... I'M WAITING FOR SOMETHING.
THIS COCHENOUR WAS NOT ONLY THE RICHEST TOURIST I HAD EVER GUIDED, HE WAS ONE OF THE BEST INFORMED.
I NEEDED TO THINK ABOUT THAT FOR AWHILE.

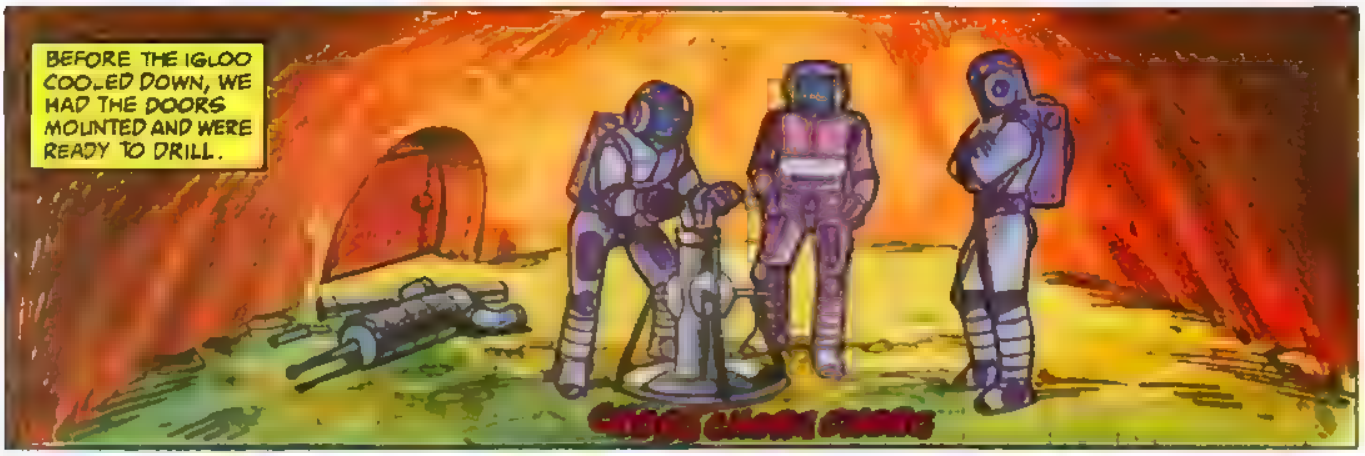
THE TWO OF THEM HIT THE SACK AND WERE SOON FAST ASLEEP. BUT WHAT I WAS WAITING FOR TOOK ALMOST AN HOUR TO COME.
UNIDENTIFIED VESSEL AT ONE-THREE-FIVE, ZERO-SEVEN, FIVE-ONE, FIVE-FOUR! PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELF AND STATE YOUR PURPOSE! OVER!
THIS IS PILOT AUDEE WALTHERS, AIRBODY POPPA TARE THREE, OUT OF THE SPINDLE.
WE ARE LICENSED AND HAVE FILED APPROVED FLIGHT PLANS. OVER.
ACKNOWLEDGED. PLEASE STAND BY.
AIRBODY POPPA TARE THREE, THIS IS GUARD ALPHA ALPHA SEVEN...ROGER YOUR I.D....ADVISE YOU ARE ELEVEN POINT FOUR KILOMETERS BEARING ONE EIGHT THREE DEGREES FROM TERMINATOR OF A RESTRICTED AREA. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.
WHAT THE HELL..?
IT'S OKAY... GO BACK TO SLEEP, BOYCE. IT'S JUST THE MILITARY CHECKING US OUT.

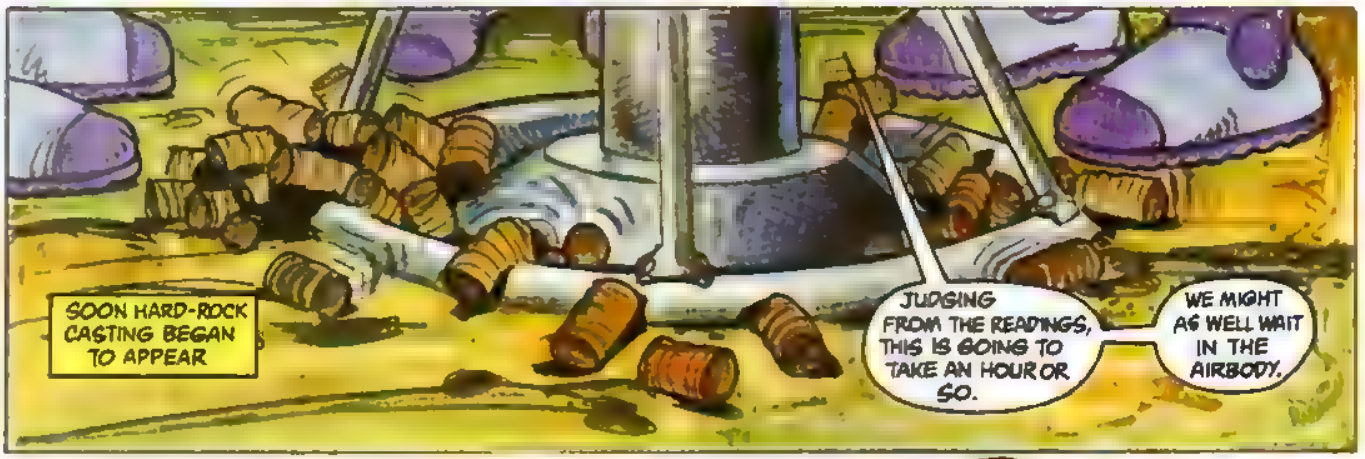
UNDER MILITARY REGULATIONS ONE SEVEN AND ONE EIGHT, SECTIONS...
I KNOW THE DRILL. I HAVE MY GUIDE'S LICENSE AND HAVE EXPLAINED RESTRICTIONS TO PASSENGERS. OVER.
ACKNOWLEDGED. WE WILL KEEP YOU UNDER SURVEILLANCE. IF YOU OBSERVE VESSELS OR PERSONNEL ON THE SURFACE, THEY ARE OUR PERIMETER TEAMS.
DO NOT INTERFERE WITH THEM IN ANY WAY RESPOND AT ONCE TO ANY REQUEST FOR IDENTIFICATION OR INFORMATION.
ROGER .., READ YOU LOUD AND CLEAR!
THEY ACT NERVOUS.
NO...THEY'RE USED TO SEEING US AROUND...THEY'VE GOT NOTHING ELSE TO DO, THAT'S ALL.
AUDEE, YOU TOLD THEM YOU'D EXPLAINED THE RESTRICTIONS TO US. I DON'T REMEMBER THAT PART.
WELL... WE STAY OUT OF THE RESTRICTED AREA, BECAUSE IF WE DON'T, THEY'LL START SHOOTING. THAT IS THE WHOLE OF THE LAW.
THEY WON'T BE BACK FOR A WHILE... WE CAN ALL GET SOME SLEEP NOW!

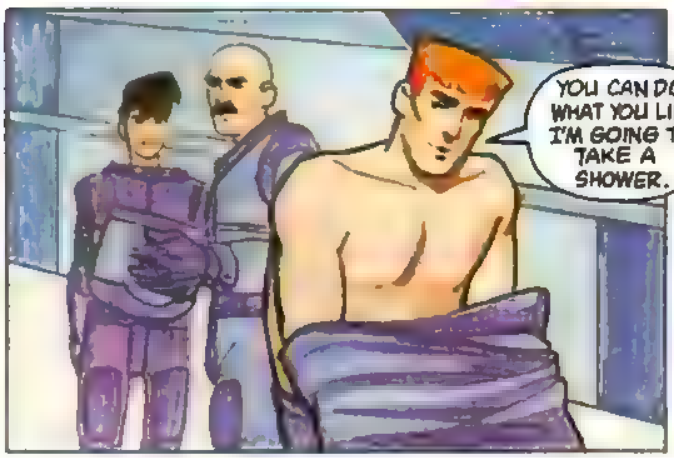
FOUR HOURS LATER WE WERE ALL AWAKE AND TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OF THE PATTERNS THAT THE COMPUTER HAD TRACED
LOOK AT THIS ONE...IT'S ALMOST OUTSIDE OUR DOOR! WE WOULDN'T EVEN HAVE TO MOVE TO DIG FOR IT.
ARE ALL EIGHT "SIGHTINGS" UNEXPLORED TUNNELS?
NO. WISH THEY WERE.
ANY OR ALL OF THEM COULD HAVE BEEN EXPLORED BUT NOT RECORDED.
OR...THEY MIGHT BE FRACTURE FAULTS...OR SOME MOLTEN MATERIAL THAT HARDENED AND GOT COVERED OVER A BILLION YEARS AGO.
THE ONLY THING WE KNOW FOR SURE IS THAT THERE PROBABLY AREN'T ANY UNEXPLORED TUNNELS IN THIS AREA, EXCEPT IN THOSE EIGHT PLACES.
SO...WHAT DO WE DO?
WE DIG -- RIGHT HERE! IT'S OUR BEST BET!

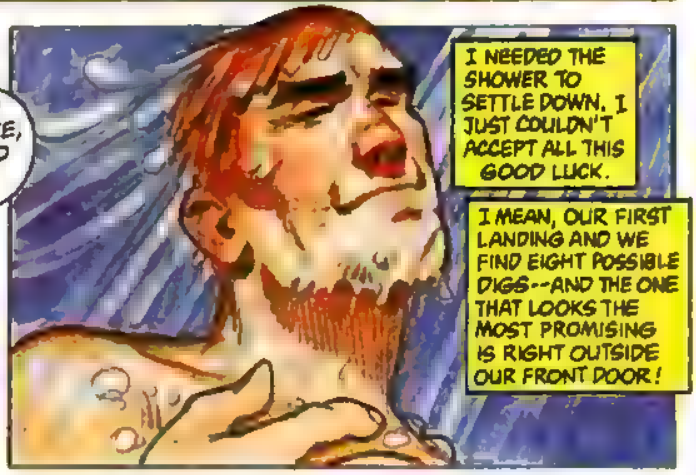

THERE'S A LOT OF HEAT AND PRESSURE TO KEEP OUT WHEN YOU GO ABOUT THE SURFACE OF VENUS.
♫TA-DA!♫
SO...WE SPENT THE NEXT COUPLE OF HOURS CHECKING AND ADJUSTING OUR HOT-SUITS.
ESPECIALLY DOROTHA'S. SOMEHOW I COULDN'T BEAR THE THOUGHT OF HER FRYING OUT THERE.
LET'S HOPE AN ITCH DOESN'T BREAK OUT. IT CAN GET SERIOUS WHEN THERE'S NO WAY TO STOP IT!
FINALLY, WE WERE READY FOR A FIRST TRIAL.
I LET THEM PRACTICE MOVING AROUND, LEANING INTO THE WIND, WHILE I PULLED THE IGLOO INTO POSITION.
STAND BACK! I'VE IGNITED IT
FSSSSSSSSSSS

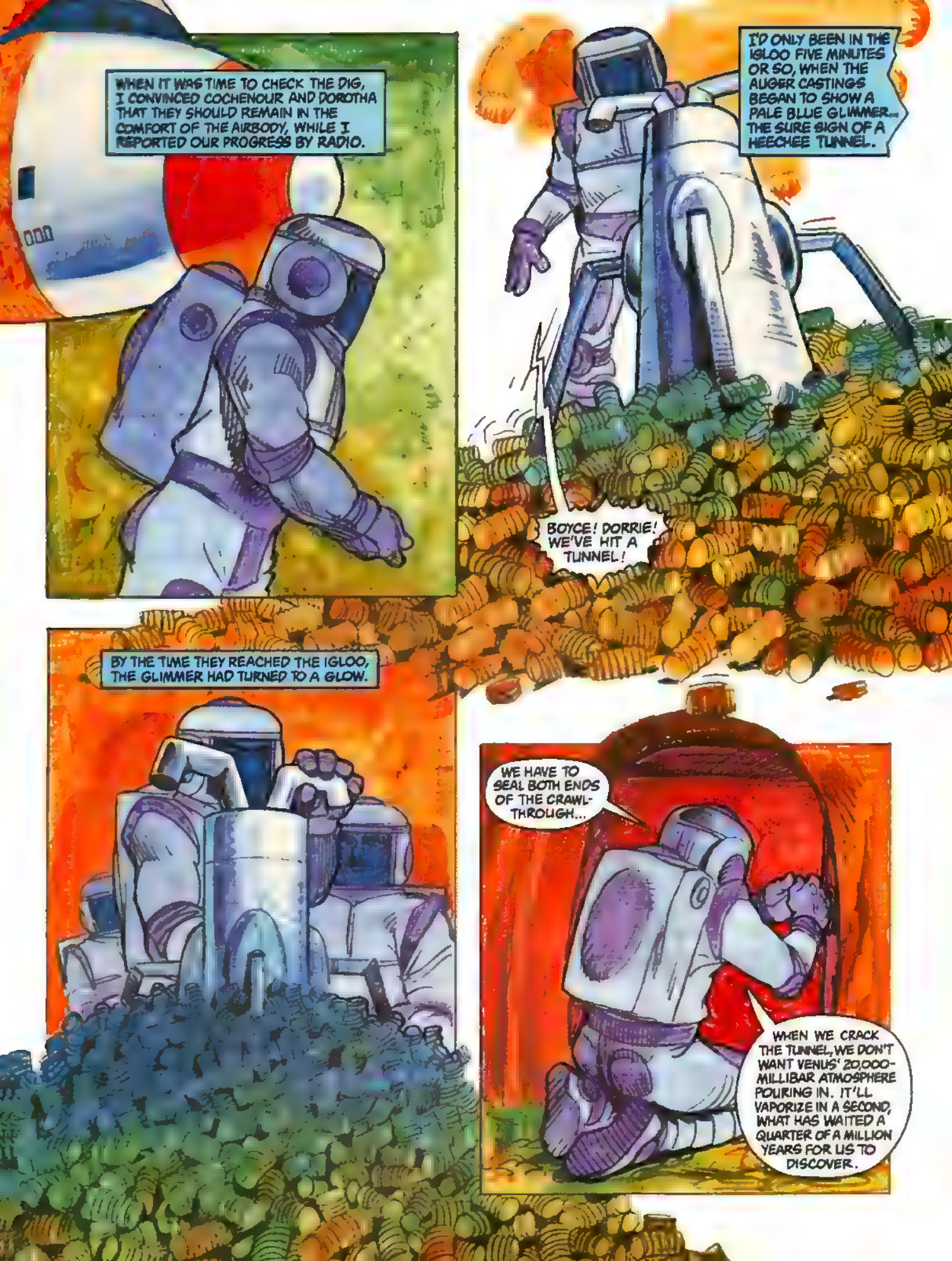

OKAY-- COME ON IN.
BOYCE, BRING IN ONE OF THE AUGERS.

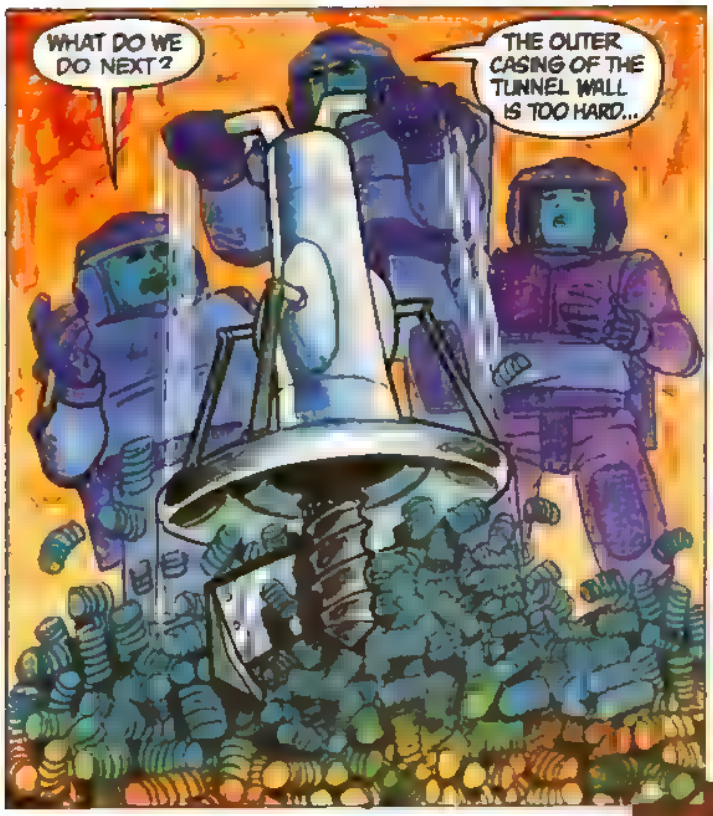

BEFORE THE IGLOO COOLED DOWN, WE HAD THE DOORS MOUNTED AND WERE READY TO DRILL.

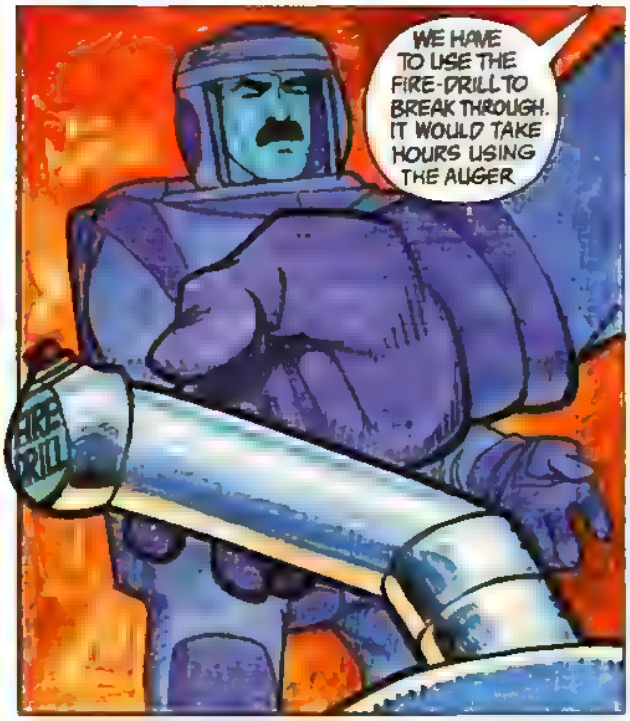

SOON HARD-ROCK CASTING BEGAN TO APPEAR
JUDGING FROM THE READINGS, THIS IS GOING TO TAKE AN HOUR OR SO.
WE MIGHT AS WELL WAIT IN THE AIRBODY.


YOU CAN DO WHAT YOU LIKE, I'M GOING TO TAKE A SHOWER.


I NEEDED THE SHOWER TO SETTLE DOWN. I JUST COULDN'T ACCEPT ALL THIS GOOD LUCK.
I MEAN, OUR FIRST LANDING AND WE FIND EIGHT POSSIBLE DIGS--AND THE ONE THAT LOOKS THE MOST PROMISING IS RIGHT OUTSIDE OUR FRONT DOOR!

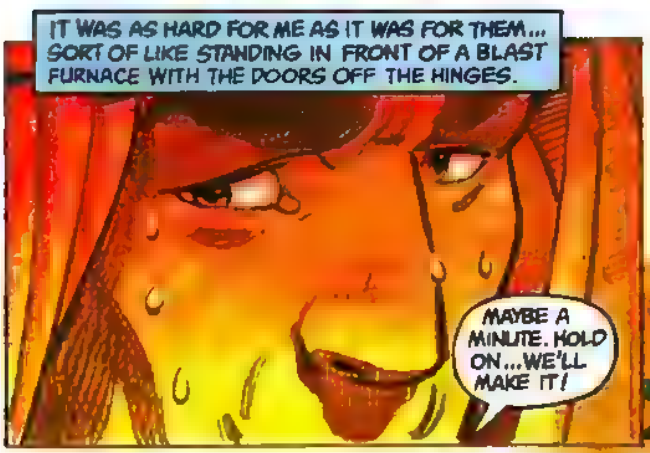

WHEN IT WAS TIME TO CHECK THE DIG, I CONVINCED COCHENOUR AND DOROTHA THAT THEY SHOULD REMAIN IN THE COMFORT OF THE AIRBODY, WHILE I REPORTED OUR PROGRESS BY RADIO.
I'D ONLY BEEN IN THE IGLOO FIVE MINUTES OR SO, WHEN THE AUGER CASTINGS BEGAN TO SHOW A PALE BLUE GLIMMER... THE SURE SIGN OF A HEECHEE TUNNEL.
BOYCE! DORRIE! WE'VE HIT A TUNNEL!
BY THE TIME THEY REACHED THE IGLOO, THE GLIMMER HAD TURNED TO A GLOW.
WE HAVE TO SEAL BOTH ENDS OF THE CRAWL-THROUGH...
WHEN WE CRACK THE TUNNEL, WE DON'T WANT VENUS' 20,000-MILLIBAR ATMOSPHERE POURING IN. IT'LL VAPORIZE IN A SECOND, WHAT HAS WAITED A QUARTER OF A MILLION YEARS FOR US TO DISCOVER.

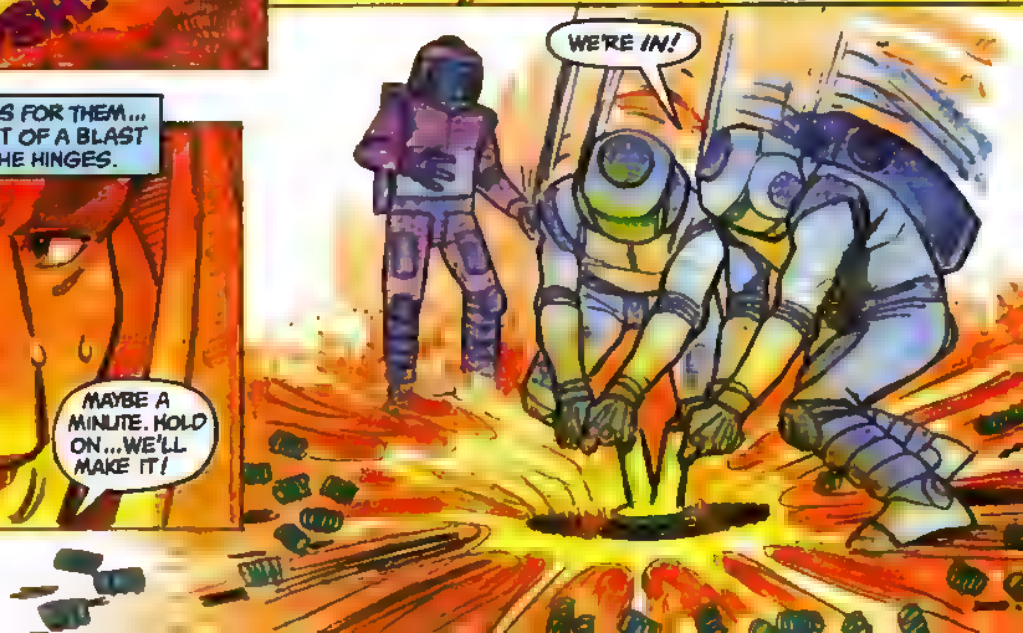

WHAT DO WE DO NEXT?
THE OUTER CASING OF THE TUNNEL WALL IS TOO HARD...


WE HAVE TO USE THE FIRE-DRILL TO BREAK THROUGH. IT WOULD TAKE HOURS USING THE AUGER
FIRE DRILL

STEEL YOURSELVES! THIS HEAT WILL OVERLOAD OUR HOT SUITS' COOLING SYSTEM IN SECONDS!
WHOOSH!

OH! I...I THINK I'M GOING TO
FAINT IF YOU WANT TO...BUT DON'T GET SICK!
WALTHERS! HOW LONG DOES THIS GO ON?


IT WAS AS HARD FOR ME AS IT WAS FOR THEM... SORT OF LIKE STANDING IN FRONT OF A BLAST FURNACE WITH THE DOORS OFF THE HINGES.
MAYBE A MINUTE. HOLD ON...WE'LL MAKE IT!


WE'RE IN!

THERE'S NO PRESSURE DIFFERENTIAL.
MEANING--?
THIS TUNNEL'S BEEN BREACHED! LET'S GO BACK--

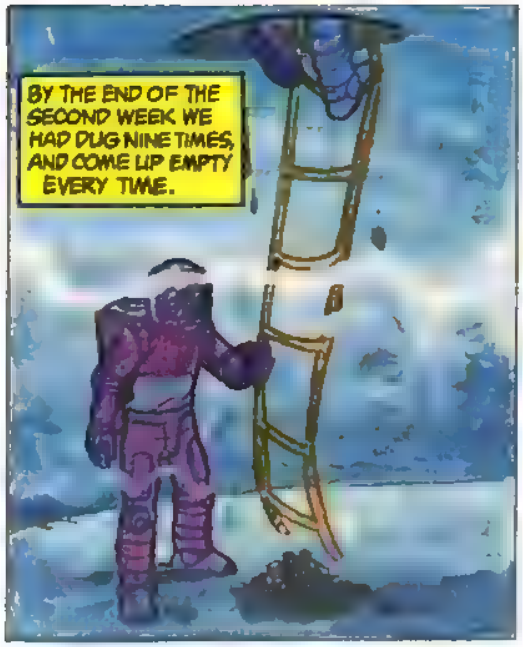
NO, AUDEE! I WANT TO GO DOWN THERE AND SEE WHAT'S INSIDE!
LISTEN UP, DORRIE! DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT HE'S SAYING?
THIS ONE'S A DUD!

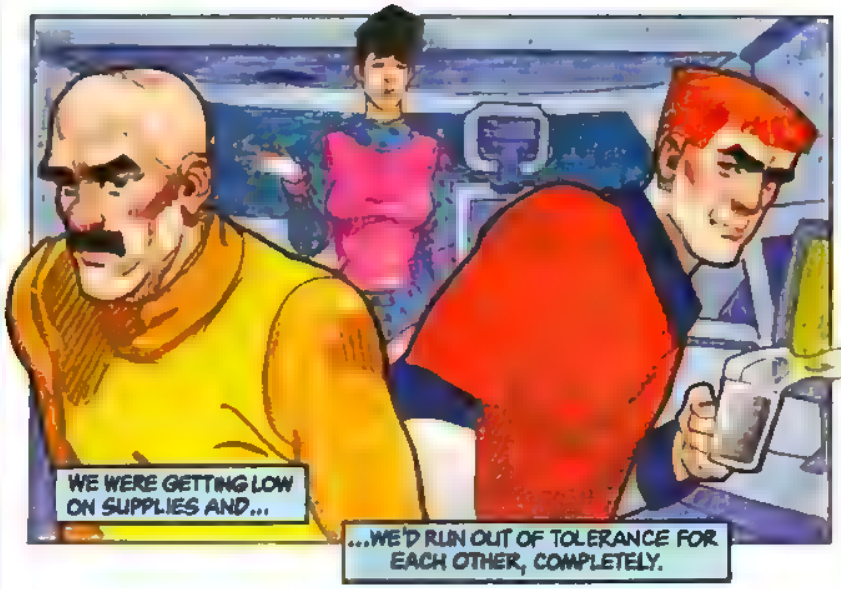
STILL, THERE'S ALWAYS THE CHANCE THAT A BREACHED TUNNEL OPENED UP TO A SEISMOLOGICAL INVASION AND NOT TO A DIGGER'S TORCH...SO, FOR DOROTHA, WE DECIDED TO GO DOWN.

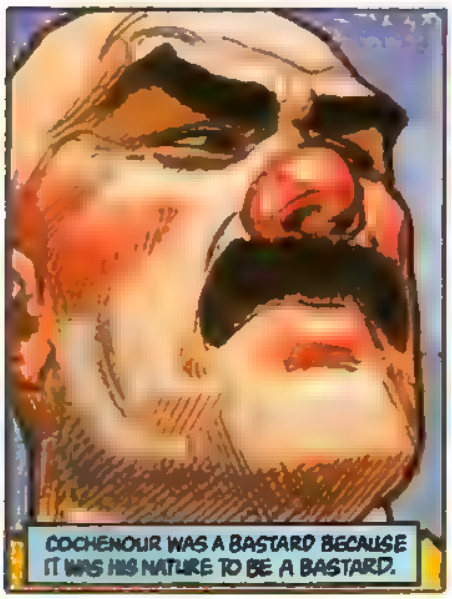
EMPTY!

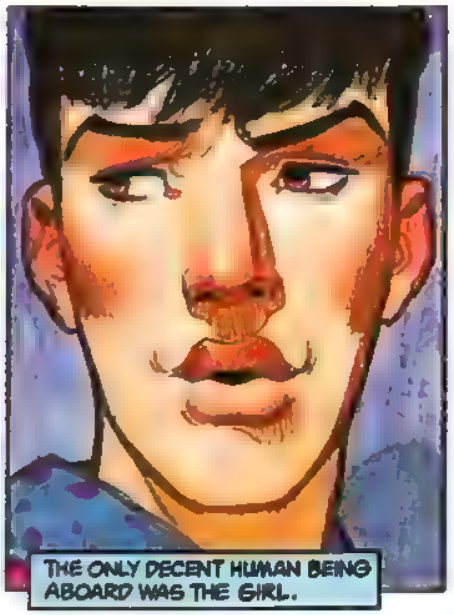
NOBODY SAID MUCH WHEN WE GOT BACK TO THE AIRBODY.
WELL, THAT'S JUST THE FIRST ...AND IT'S ONLY OUR SECOND DAY.
SHUT UP, DORRIE. THE ONE THING I'M NOT IS A GOOD LOSER.

THE NEXT MORNING WE WERE BACK AT IT.
WE DROVE OURSELVES HARD AND AS THE DAYS PASSED, I FOUND MYSELF RUBBING MY RIGHT SIDE, JUST UNDER THE SHORT RIBS, MORE AND MORE.
THE MILITARY BOYS OVERFLEW US HALF A DOZEN TIMES IN THE FIRST FEW DAYS.
THEY DIDN'T SAY MUCH... JUST FORMAL REQUESTS FOR I.D....BY THE BOOK... CRAP.
SITE B TURNED OUT TO BE A PEGMATITE DIKE.
SITES D AND E WERE LAYERS OF ASH AND GRAVEL.
SITE C LOOKED GOOD ON THE SCANNER, BUT I VETOED A DIG BECAUSE IT WAS CLOSE TO THE MILITARY PERIMETER... MAYBE EVEN INSIDE IT!
COCHENOUR GAVE ME A HELL OF AN ARGUMENT ABOUT THAT, AND I HALF-PROMISED THAT IF WE HAD NO LUCK ELSEWHERE, WE'D SNEAK BACK FOR A QUICK DIG BEFORE RETURNING TO THE SPINDLE.
WE LIFTED THE AIRBODY, MOVED TO A NEW POSITION...
...AND SET OUT A NEW PATTERN OF PROBES.









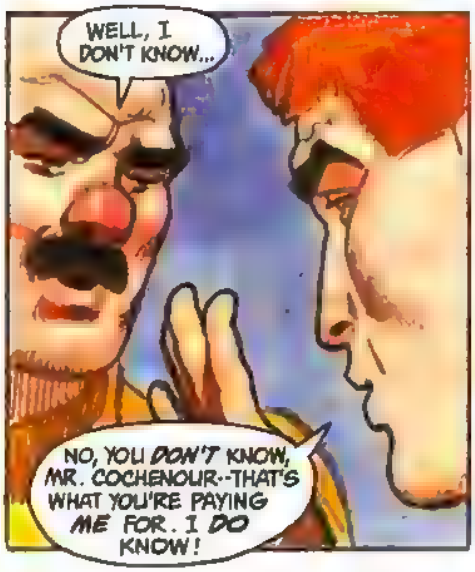
SHE TRIED HARD TO SOOTHE COCHENOUR'S AND MY HOSTILITIES... BUT SHE WAS JUST A KID... SHE HADN'T BEEN ALIVE LONG ENOUGH TO GROW A DEFENSE AGAINST CONCENTRATED MEANNESS.

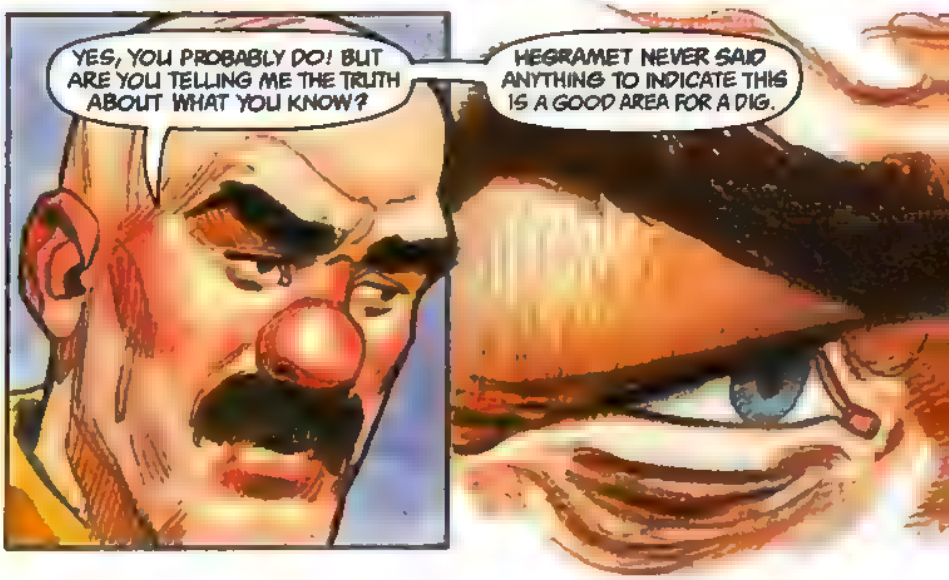
THERE WASN'T MUCH JOY ON VENUS FOR DORRIE KEEFER...

COCHENOUR AND I POURED OUT WEEKS OF PENT-UP HATE IN THE ARGUMENT THAT FOLLOWED.
HE WANTED TO RETURN TO SITE C FOR OUR LAST DIG, AND I WANTED TO STAY WHERE WE WERE

FINALLY DURING A LULL IN BATTLE--GUESS WE WERE SORT OF RELOADING--I GAINED A LITTLE CONTROL...

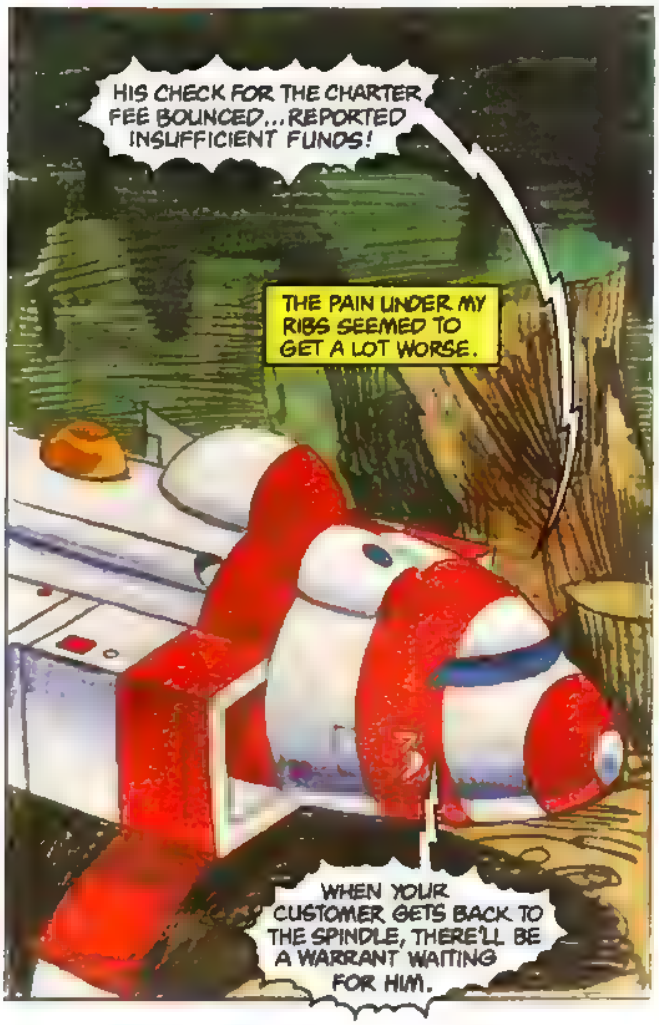
THINK ABOUT IT?!
DON'T PUSH ME, COCHENOUR!
THE MILITARY RESERVATION IS NOT TO BE FOOLED WITH! THOSE BOYS SHOOT FIRST AND ASK LATER!




YES, YOU PROBABLY DO! BUT ARE YOU TELLING ME THE TRUTH ABOUT WHAT YOU KNOW?
HEGRAMET NEVER SAID ANYTHING TO INDICATE THIS IS A GOOD AREA FOR A DIG.

I WAS TRYING TO DECIDE WHETHER TO ASK HOW HE CAME TO KNOW PROFESSOR HEGRAMET, EARTH'S GREATEST AUTHORITY ON HEECHEE DIGGINGS, WHEN...
OKAY, PUT OUT YOUR PROBES AND WE'LL TRY IT YOUR WAY...ONE MORE TIME.
COME ON, DORRIE, LET'S CATCH A FEW WINKS.
AFTER I PLOPPED THE PROBES OUT AND FIRED THE NOISEMAKERS, THERE WASN'T MUCH TO DO BUT WATCH THE LINES BUILD UP ON THE SCANNER.
OF COURSE, I DIDN'T NEED TO WATCH THE SCANNER THIS EARLY IN THE TRACE, BUT IT GAVE ME A GOOD EXCUSE TO THINK IN PRIVATE...
..AND COCHENOUR NEEDED TO BE THOUGHT ABOUT.
FOR ONE THING, HE HAD KNOWN HE WAS GOING TO BE SINKING SHAFTS AFTER HEECHEE DIGS LONG BEFORE MY LITTLE SALES TALK, PROBABLY LONG BEFORE HE LEFT EARTH. HE HAD BRIEFED HIMSELF ON THE WHOLE BIT, EVEN DOWN TO HANDLING THE INSTRUMENTS ON MY AIRBODY.
=BZZT= AIRBODY TARE THREE, THIS IS LITTLEKNEES FROM SPINDLE ONE... OVER.
ROGER, LITTLEKNEES--THIS IS AIRBODY POPPA TARE THREE, READ YOU LOUD AND CLEAR...OVER.

A PRIVATE WORD FOR YOU, AUDEE... IS YOUR SAHIB AROUND?
ROGER, LITTLEKNEES...IN SIGHT, BUT NOT RECEIVING. WHAT HAVE YOU GOT FOR ME?
THIS CAME OVER THE SYNSAT NET A COUPLE OF MINUTES AGO. SEEMS COCHENOUR'S CHARTER CAPTAIN IS RIGHTEOUSLY PISSED OFF.
YEG, BASE, YOUR SIGNAL'S RECEIVED, STRENGTH TEN.


HIS CHECK FOR THE CHARTER FEE BOUNCED...REPORTED INSUFFICIENT FUNDS!
THE PAIN UNDER MY RIBS SEEMED TO GET A LOT WORSE.
WHEN YOUR CUSTOMER GETS BACK TO THE SPINDLE, THERE'LL BE A WARRANT WAITING FOR HIM.

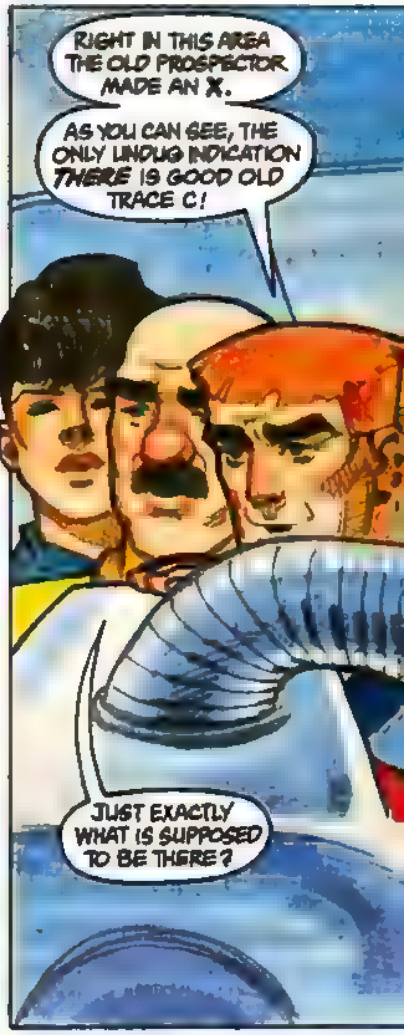
WHAT THE HELL'S THE MATTER WITH YOU, WALTHERS?
I WASN'T HEARING HIS VOICE... I WAS HEARING THE VOICE OF MY DOCTOR, AND HIS EQUATION: NO CASH = TOTAL HEPATIC FAILURE = DEATH. AND MY CASH SUPPLY HAD JUST DRIED UP.

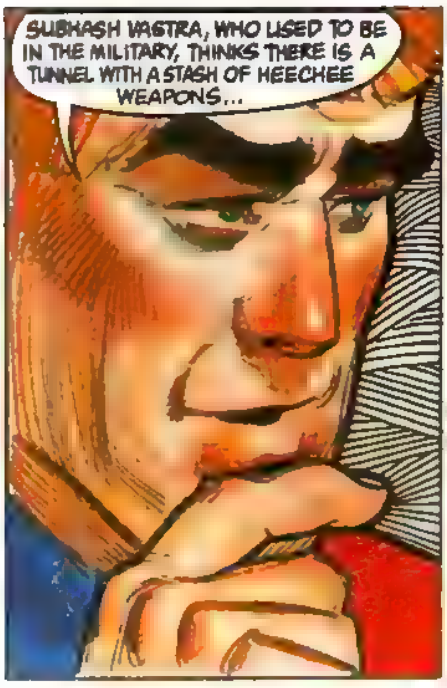
THERE'S A QUESTION THAT'S BOTHERING ME, COCHENOUR.
HOW DID YOU GET ON TO PROFESSOR HEGRAMET?
I DIDN'T GET RICH BY BEING STUPID. YOU THINK I'D COME UMPTY-MILLION MILES WITHOUT KNOWING WHAT I WAS COMING TO?
OKAY, SO YOU FOUND OUT WHAT WAS WORTH STEALING ON VENUS, AND SOMEBODY STEERED YOU TO HEGRAMET... THEN WHAT?
DID HE TELL YOU I WAS DUMB ENOUGH TO BE YOUR BOY?
HEGRAMET TOLD ME YOU WERE THE RIGHT GUIDE TO FIND A VIRGIN TUNNEL, THAT'S ALL!
BUT, IT WASN'T THE *FUN* OF MAKING *MORE* MONEY THAT BROUGHT YOU HERE ...IT WAS MONEY, PERIOD! MONEY THAT YOU NEEDED DESPERATELY!
HOW ABOUT IT, DORRIE? DID YOU KNOW THE OLD MAN WAS BROKE?
I SEE YOU DIDN'T--TOUGH ON YOU. HIS CHECK TO THE GASBUN MUST STILL BE BOUNCING. AT LEAST I HOPE YOU GOT YOUR COMPENSATION IN FURS AND JEWELS...
OH, BOYCE... I'M *SO* SORRY...

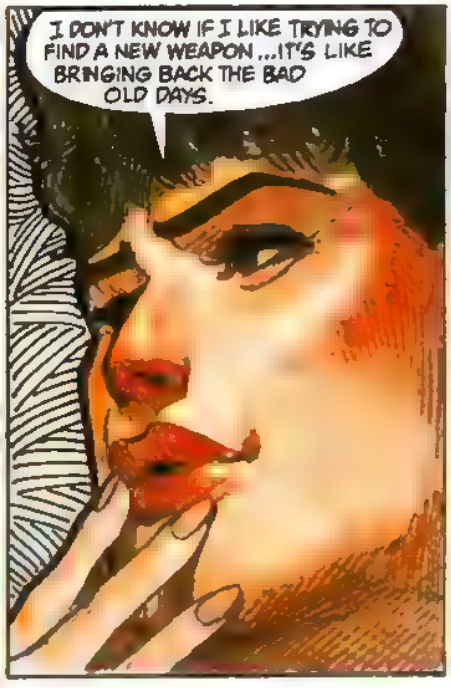
HOURS PASSED, AND NOBODY SPOKE.
CURIOUSLY, I FELT KIND OF RELAXED. THERE IS SOMETHING TRANQUILIZING ABOUT THE REALIZATION THAT YOU HAVE NOTHING MUCH LEFT TO LOSE.
I HAD ONLY A FEW PILLS LEFT, AND THE TASTE IN MY MOUTH AND THE PAIN IN MY GUT WEREN'T LETTING ME ENJOY LIFE VERY MUCH.
ONLY A MIRACLE COULD KEEP ME FROM DYING IN A MATTER OF DAYS.
I COULD FLY THE AIRBODY BACK TO THE SPINDLE, TURN COCHENOUR OVER TO THE GENDARMES, AND SPEND MY LAST DAYS INTRODUCING DOROTHA AROUND. VASTRA OR BEEGEE WOULD HELP HER GET ORGANIZED.
SHE MIGHT NOT EVEN HAVE TO GO INTO PROSTITUTION OR THE RACKETS.
THEN I COULD FLING MYSELF ON THE MERCY OF THE QUACKERY, ASK FOR A NEW LIVER ON CREDIT... EXCEPT, THEY HAD NEVER GIVEN ANYONE CREDIT!
OR, I COULD OPEN THE TWO FUEL VALVES AND LET THEM MIX FOR TEN MINUTES OR SO...THEN HIT THE IGNITER AND BLOW US ALL TO KINGDOM COME.
OR...
OH, HELL! BUCK UP, COCHENOUR! WE'RE NOT DEAD YET!

I'M SORRY ABOUT YOUR CHECK, WALTHERS; I EXPECT YOU NEEDED THE MONEY.
YOU HAVE NO IDEA!
FOR A WHILE I KEPT MY INDUSTRIES GOING ON WHAT WAS LEFT AFTER I SIPHONED OFF THE COSTS FOR MY TRANSPLANTS AND TREATMENTS.
A MILLION FOR THIS, A HUNDRED GRAND A WEEK FOR THAT... ON IT WENT!
BUT THEN THERE WASN'T ENOUGH LEFT!
YOU JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT IT TAKES TO KEEP A HUNDRED-YEAR-OLD MAN ALIVE!
NINETY, YOU MEAN.
NO, NOT NINETY, AND NOT EVEN A HUNDRED.
I THINK I'M AT LEAST A HUNDRED AND TEN! MAYBE MORE! WHO COUNTS?
SIGN THIS!
WHAT IS IT?
A RELEASE FROM THE ALL-RIGHTS SECTION OF OUR CHARTER AGREEMENT. IT STATES THAT YOU VOLUNTARILY WAIVE YOUR OWNERSHIP OF ANYTHING WE FIND... IN MY FAVOR.
WHAT'S THIS BIT AT THE END?
THAT'S WHERE I GIVE YOU TEN PERCENT, IF WE FIND ANYTHING!
THAT'S CHARITY... BUT I'LL SIGN! I DON'T HAVE ANY CHOICE.
NOW HELP ME PREPARE TO BLAST OFF... WE'RE RETURNING TO TRACE C!

I'VE MEMORIZED A MAP THAT WAS SHOWN TO ME BY A FRIEND, WHO GOT IT FROM HIS MOTHER, WHO GOT IT FROM A PROSPECTOR, A LONG TIME AGO...
BUT, FOR WHATEVER REASON, AFTER WE BLASTED OFF, I FOUND MYSELF SPILLING THE BEANS...
PERHAPS THERE IS A CAMARADERIE THAT GROWS FROM MUTUAL DESPERATION... OR MAYBE IT WAS BECAUSE COCHENOUR SIGNED AWAY HIS RIGHTS...


JUST EXACTLY WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO BE THERE?
AS YOU CAN SEE, THE ONLY UNDUG INDICATION THERE IS GOOD OLD TRACE C!
RIGHT IN THIS AREA THE OLD PROSPECTOR MADE AN X.

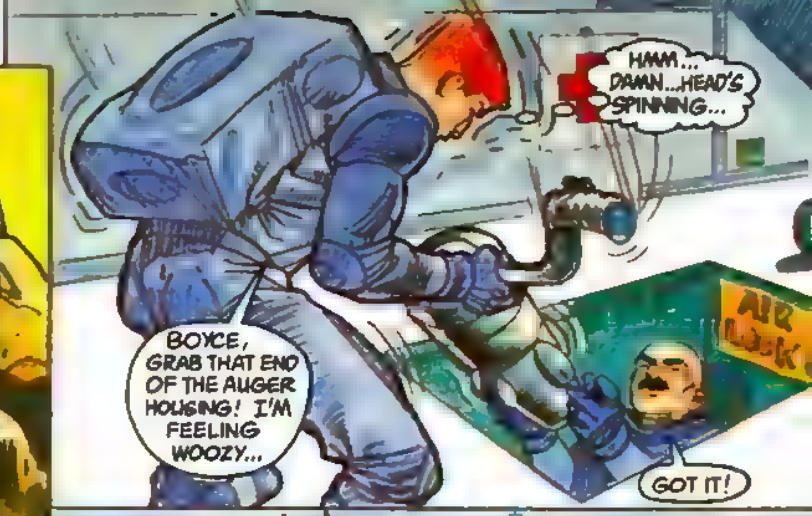

SUBHASH VASTRA, WHO USED TO BE IN THE MILITARY, THINKS THERE IS A TUNNEL WITH A STASH OF HEECHEE WEAPONS...


I DON'T KNOW IF I LIKE TRYING TO FIND A NEW WEAPON ...IT'S LIKE BRINGING BACK THE BAD OLD DAYS.

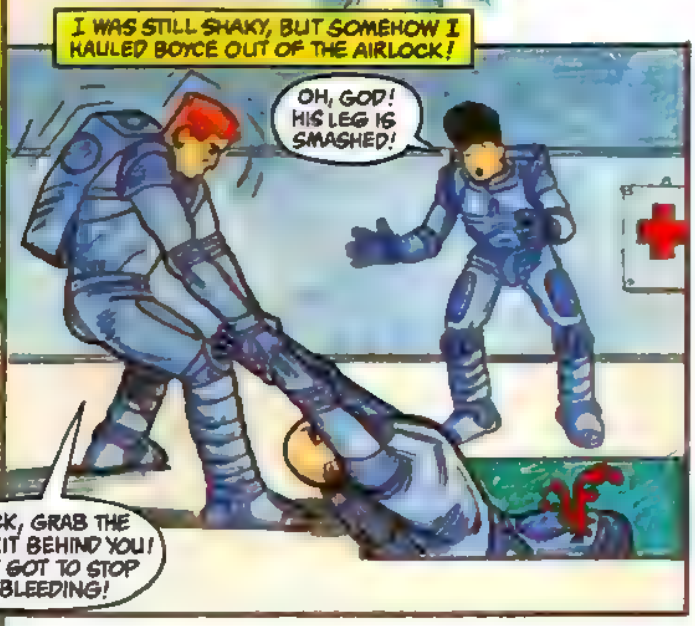
BUT SINCE THE SOLDIERS THINK THERE MIGHT BE A WEAPON SOMEWHERE AROUND, THEY'RE NOT ABOUT TO LET US DIG, RIGHT?
THE POINT IS THAT WE MIGHT FIND AN UNTAPPED HEECHEE DIG FOR WHATEVER IS IN IT.

RIGHT...THAT'S WHY THE MILITARY BASE IS LOCATED WHERE IT IS! THEY'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR THE WEAPONG FOR YEARS!
AND SINCE THEY'D SHOOT FIRST AND ASK QUESTIONS LATER, HOW DO YOU PROPOSE TO GET AROUND THAT LITTLE PROBLEM?
WE TRY TO FOOL THEM WE SEND THE AIRBODY OFF, AND YOU AND I STAY BEHIND TO DO THE DIGGING.
BUT THAT MEANS I HAVE TO TAKE THE AIRBODY--
--AND I CAN'T FLY THE THING!
NO, YOU CAN'T. BUT YOU CAN LET IT FLY ITSELF...ON AUTO-PILOT. IT'LL BE ROUGH, BUT THERE'S A 99 PERCENT CHANCE IT WILL LAND YOU AT THE SPINDLE SAFELY
THEN WHAT?
DORRIE LOOKS UP MY FRIEND BEEGEE. I'LL WRITE DOWN ALL THE COORDINATES, AND HE'LL COME PICK US UP.
DOROTHA WILL LEAVE HER TANKS WITH US, GIVING US ENOUGH AIR FOR MAYBE 48 HOURS. SO IF BEEGEE'S LATE, WE'RE IN TROUBLE.
I DIDN'T SAY IT WAS A GUARANTEE, BUT AT LEAST IT GIVES US A CHANCE.

BETWEEN US, COCHENOUR AND I CONVINCED DORRIE TO GIVE MY "DESPERATION" PLAN A TRY.
I WAS FEELING WEAKER BY THE MINUTE, BUT I MANAGED TO LAND THE AIRBODY A RESPECTABLE DISTANCE FROM SITE C...
...AND WE BEGAN TO PREPARE FOR THE DIG.
WE'LL JUST TAKE WHAT'S ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY...AND HURRY!
I'D LIKE DORRIE TO BE GONE BEFORE THE STAR-SPANGLED BOYS DO THEIR FIRST FLYOVER.


HMM... DAMN...HEAD'S SPINNING...
BOYCE, GRAB THAT END OF THE AUGER HOUSING! I'M FEELING WOOZY...
AIR LOCK
GOT IT!

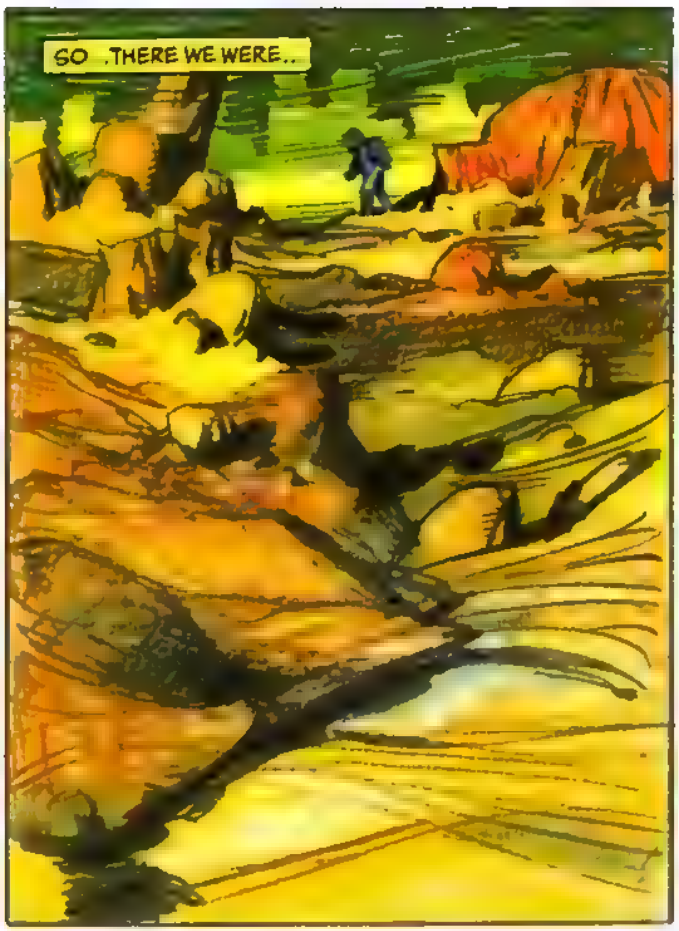
LOOK OUT, BOYCE!
AHHHG!


I WAS STILL SHAKY, BUT SOMEHOW I HAULED BOYCE OUT OF THE AIRLOCK!
OH, GOD! HIS LEG IS SMASHED!
QUICK, GRAB THE MED KIT BEHIND YOU! WE'VE GOT TO STOP THE BLEEDING!

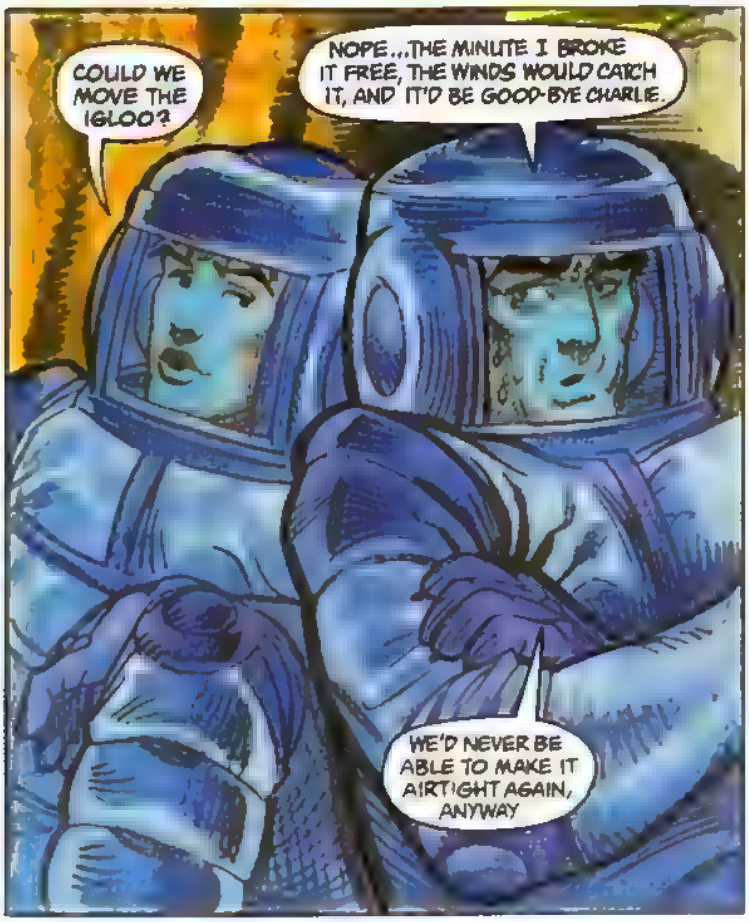
AS SOON AS WE HAD COCHENOUR BANDAGED AND SPLINTED, I GAVE HIM A WAKE-UP NEEDLE.
ALL RIGHT, NOW WHAT? ARE WE GIVING UP?
NO. WE'LL DO IT A DIFFERENT WAY.
HE CAN'T, ALIDEE! LOOK AT HIM! HE COULDN'T LAST AN HOUR, MUCH LESS HELP YOU DIG!
SO I'LL DIG ALONE!
WHO YOU KIDDING? IT'S A TWO-MAN JOB!
WE DON'T HAVE ANY ALTERNATIVE!

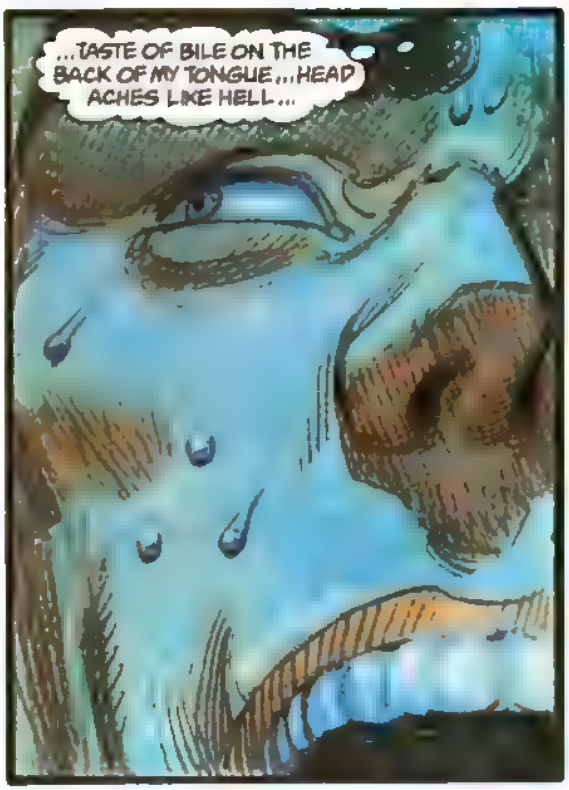
WRONG! DORRIE CAN HELP YOU!
SOLID MUSCLE, THIS GIRL. TAKES AFTER HER GRANDMOTHER.
YOU TALK AS THOUGH DORRIE DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO SAY ABOUT IT.
I THINK I COULD HELP. I'VE LEARNED A LOT.
AND IF YOU WANT THE TRUTH, ALIDEE, YOU LOOK A LOT WORSE THAN I DO!

WELL, AS LONG AS YOU PUT IT THAT WAY--
ALL RIGHT, LET'S GET BOYCE DRESSED AND IN THE PILOT'S SEAT, AND GET OUR GEAR MOVED OUT.
THE BOYS IN OLIVE DRAB ARE DUE ANY MINUTE!
WE HAVE AIR, WATER, AND POWER FOR 48 HOURS. DON'T COUNT ON ANY MARGIN.
ONE OR TWO OF THEM MIGHT HOLD OUT A LITTLE LONGER, BUT YOU NEED ALL THREE TO STAY ALIVE.
A FEW HOURS LATER, I HAD TO ADMIT...DORRIE WAS AS GOOD AS A MAN. BUT THE QUESTION WAS... WAS I AS GOOD AS A MAN?
THE HEADACHE WAS REALLY POUNDING AT ME, AND I FOUND MYSELF BLACKING OUT WHENEVER I MADE A SUDDEN MOVE.
THE THREE WEEKS THE QUACKERY HAD PROMISED WAS UP... I HAD TO FIGURE I WAS ON PLUS TIME ALREADY.
TEN HOURS WENT BY AND I REALIZED WE WERE DOWN LOWER THAN THE SOUNDINGS HAD SHOWN THE TUNNEL TO BE...
...WITH NO LUMINOUS BLUE TAILINGS IN SIGHT!
WHAT'S WRONG?
WE'RE DRILLING A DRY HOLE!


SO .THERE WE WERE..

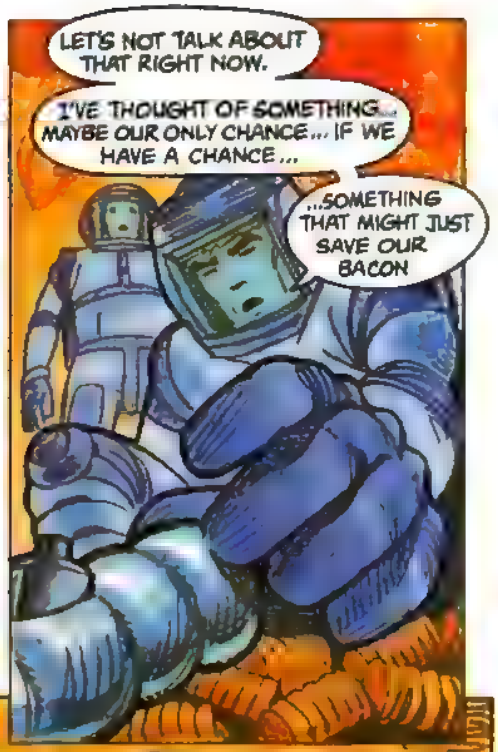
BY MY HOTSUIT CHRONOMETER, FIFTEEN HOURS WERE GONE. THAT LEFT THIRTY-SOME BEFORE COCHENOUR WOULD BE BACK TO GET US.


COULD WE MOVE THE IGLOO?
NOPE...THE MINUTE I BROKE IT FREE, THE WINDS WOULD CATCH IT, AND IT'D BE GOOD-BYE CHARLIE.
WE'D NEVER BE ABLE TO MAKE IT AIRTIGHT AGAIN, ANYWAY


...TASTE OF BILE ON THE BACK OF MY TONGUE...HEAD ACHES LIKE HELL...

HEECHEES IN THE TUNNEL! HEARD US KNOCKING AND OPENED UP THE SHAFT!
AUDEE! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? THERE ARE NO HEECHEES ON VENUS!
SEISMIC TRACE... THIS ISN'T DOWNTOWN DALLAS!
..CAN'T JUST DIG WHERE IT SAYS AND FIND WHAT YOU WANT!
AUDEE, STOP IT! CALM DOWN! YOU'RE WASTING ENERGY!
HAZY... ECHOES FROM THE PINGER... FUZZY AT THE EDGES!
PLEASE, AUDEE, CALM DOWN!
MISREAD THE TRACE... MISSED BY YARDS!
HEECHEE... WHAT DID YOU REALLY USE THOSE PRAYER FANS FOR?
HEECHEE... HAVE YOU GOT ANYTHING IN YOUR MEDICINE CHEST THAT WILL KEEP ME FROM DYING?

SORRY, KID... GUESS I LOST IT FOR A BIT. I'M OKAY NOW.
ARE YOU?
WHAT'S *WRONG* WITH YOU, AUDEE? WHY ARE YOU GOING TO DIE?

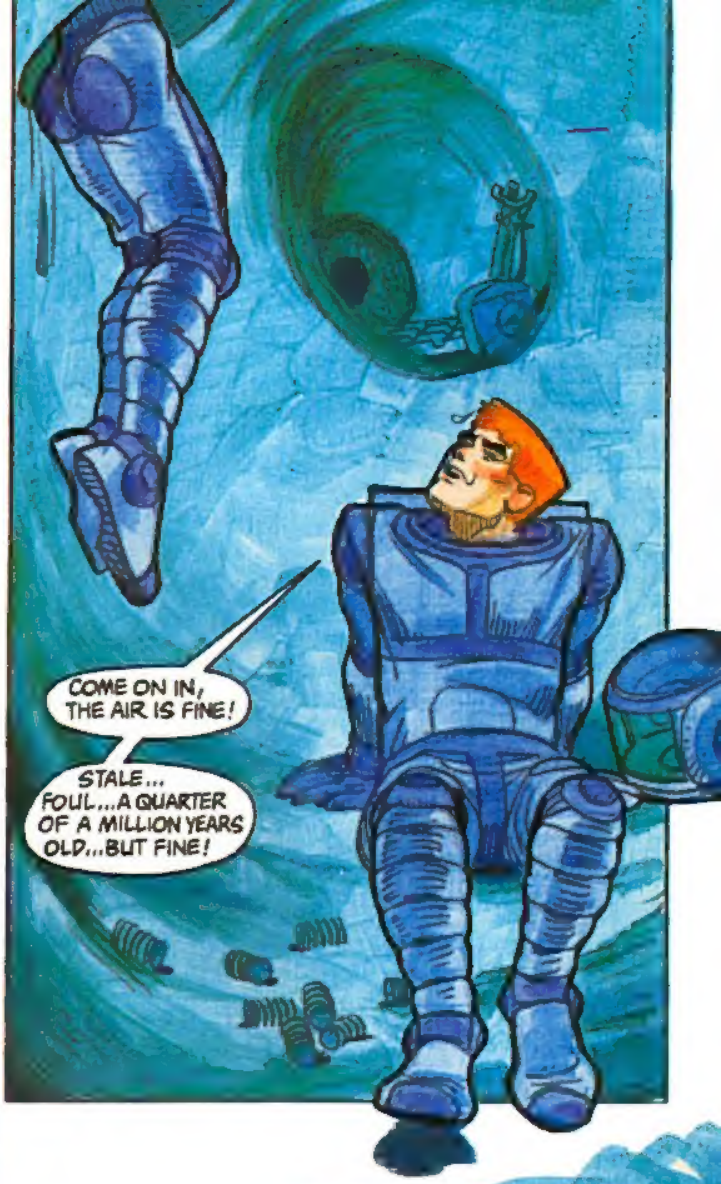

LET'S NOT TALK ABOUT THAT RIGHT NOW.
I'VE THOUGHT OF SOMETHING... MAYBE OUR ONLY CHANCE... IF WE HAVE A CHANCE...
...SOMETHING THAT MIGHT JUST SAVE OUR BACON

HELP ME SET THE AUGER BACK IN.
ONLY, THIS TIME, WE'LL DRILL AT AN *ANGLE!*
IF THE TUNNEL IS WHERE I THINK IT IS, WE'VE ONLY MISSED IT BY A FEW FEET.

THAT'S *IT!* IT'S TAKING HOLD!
CLEAR A SPOT NEAR THE WALL AND TRY TO GET SOME REST. I'LL WAKE YOU IN AN HOUR OR SO.
WHY CAN'T WE BOTH REST? CAN'T THIS THING...

IT AUTOMATICALLY SHUTS DOWN WHEN IT'S THIS FAR OFF BALANCE. I HAVE TO HOLD THE MANUAL OVER-RIDE BUTTON. GO ON, GET SOME REST!

HOURS PASSED...I DRIFTED IN AND OUT...
AUDEE! AUDEE, WAKE UP! I THINK WE'VE HIT SOMETHING!
HUH! WHA..?
Vooooooosh
THE AUGER HAS BROKEN THROUGH! WE MUST HAVE BEEN DRILLING FOR HOURS.
LOOK AT THEM... THEY'RE BEAUTIFUL!
DID YOU SEE THAT PRESSURE BLAST? WE'VE HIT PAY DIRT!


COME ON IN, THE AIR IS FINE!
STALE... FOUL...A QUARTER OF A MILLION YEARS OLD...BUT FINE!

WE MADE IT!

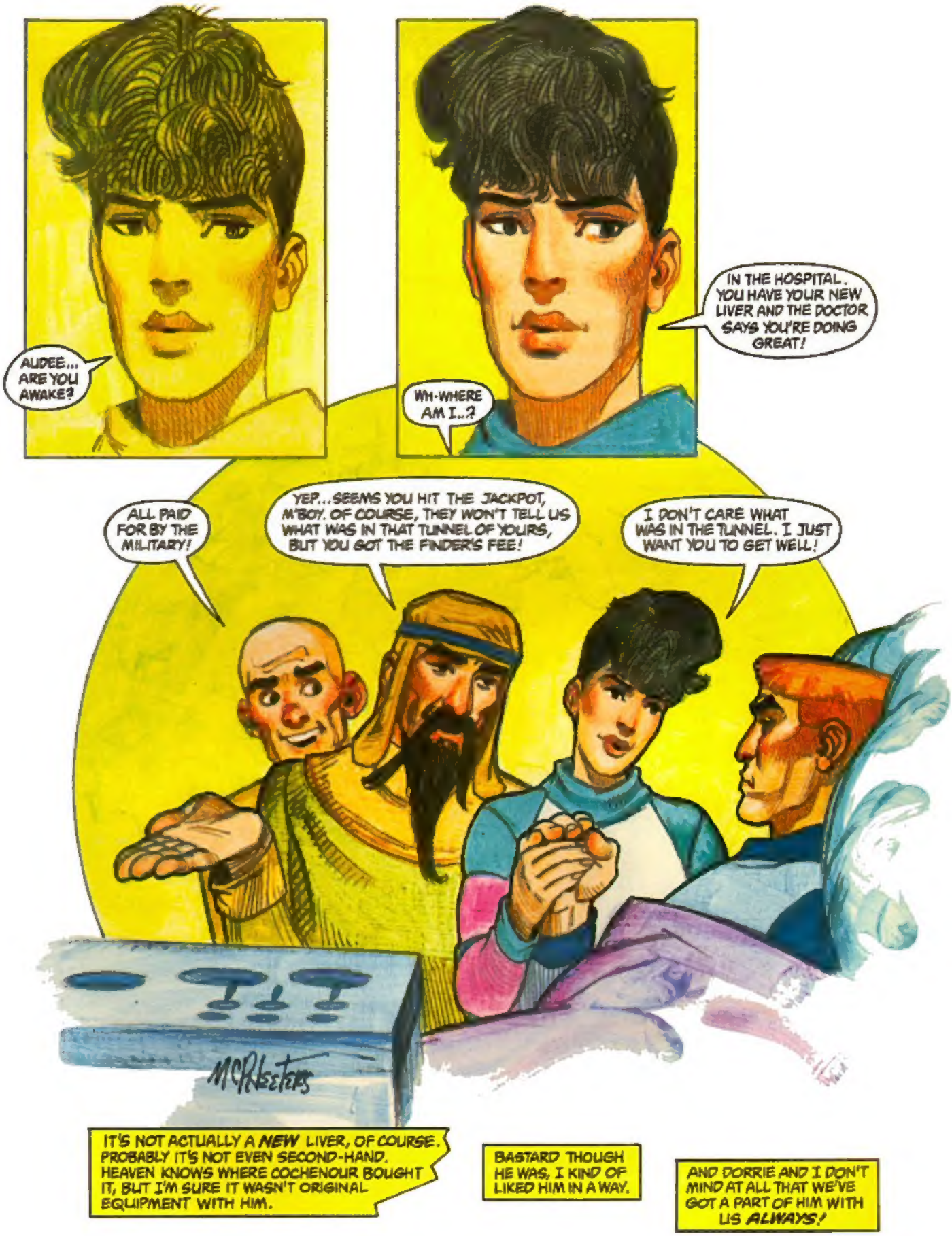
EVEN THOUGH BOTH OF US WERE BONE-WEARY TIRED, WE SPENT THE NEXT FEW HOURS EXPLORING OUR VIRGIN HEECHEE TUNNEL.
QUITE A STASH, BUT I DON'T SEE ANY WEAPONS!

LOOK, THROUGH THIS OPENING... THAT'S THE MAIN SHAFT OVER THERE!
THAT LARGE GIZMO COULD BE WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR!
I COULD PROBABLY SQUEEZE THROUGH IF I TOOK MY SUIT OFF.

NO... BOYCE IS DUE BACK IN A FEW MINUTES AND WE SHOULD BE TOPSIDE TO MEET HIM.
I'M AFRAID THAT HE MIGHT BE CARELESS ABOUT THE SEAL ON THE CRAWL-THROUGH.
20,000 MILLIBARS OF POISON GAS WOULD NOT ONLY RUIN THIS TUNNEL, IT WOULD KILL US IF WE WERE OUT OF OUR SUITS!

SO, WE SEALED BOTH ENDS OF THE CRAWL SPACE, AND WAITED.
WE HOOKED THE UNUSED FIRE-DRILL BATTERIES TO OUR HOT SUITS TO BOOST THE COOLING SYSTEM...AND WAITED...
HOURS PASSED. MY LIFE-SUPPORT METERS WERE ALL RED-LINED! IF WE HADN'T SAVED SOME OF OUR OWN AIR BY BREATHING HEECHEE AIR WE'D FOUND IN THE TUNNEL...AND IF...
SUDDENLY IT DAWNED ON ME!
COCHENOUR WAS OUT THERE SOMEWHERE...WAITING FOR US TO *DIE!*
DAMN HIM! HE WOULD GET IT ALL! THAT'S ALL HE CARED ABOUT!
THEN I HEARD FUMBLING AT THE OUTER DOOR!
HE WAS BACK!

I CLOSED MY EYES AND DIDN'T MOVE.
SOON, THE PRESSURE INCREASED IN THE CRAWL-THROUGH AND I KNEW THE DOOR WAS OPEN.
THEN THROUGH THE DOOR HE CAME, DRAGGING HIS BUM LEG, HEAVY WRENCH IN HAND!
AND I KNEW HE WASN'T BENT ON REPAIRING EQUIPMENT!
I WRAPPED MY FINGERS AROUND A STONE AND...
SURPRISE, YOU BASTARD!
SOMEHOW I GOT DORRIE BACK TO THE AIRBODY AND MYSELF TO THE RADIO.
MAY DAY...MAY DAY. THIS IS AIRBODY POPPA TARE THREE... AT ONE THREE FIVE, ZERO SEVEN, FIVE ONE...FIVE...FOUR...
IS...IS BOYCE DEAD?
I THINK I WHISPERED "YES," JUST AS I PASSED OUT.


AUDEE... ARE YOU AWAKE?
WH-WHERE AM I...?
IN THE HOSPITAL. YOU HAVE YOUR NEW LIVER AND THE DOCTOR SAYS YOU'RE DOING GREAT!
ALL PAID FOR BY THE MILITARY!
YEP... SEEMS YOU HIT THE JACKPOT, M'BOY. OF COURSE, THEY WON'T TELL US WHAT WAS IN THAT TUNNEL OF YOURS, BUT YOU GOT THE FINDER'S FEE!
I DON'T CARE WHAT WAS IN THE TUNNEL. I JUST WANT YOU TO GET WELL!
M C Roberts
IT'S NOT ACTUALLY A NEW LIVER, OF COURSE. PROBABLY IT'S NOT EVEN SECOND-HAND. HEAVEN KNOWS WHERE COCHENOUR BOUGHT IT, BUT I'M SURE IT WASN'T ORIGINAL EQUIPMENT WITH HIM.
BASTARD THOUGH HE WAS, I KIND OF LIKED HIM IN A WAY.
AND DORRIE AND I DON'T MIND AT ALL THAT WE'VE GOT A PART OF HIM WITH US ALWAYS!